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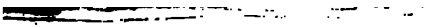
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VOL. I.



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Lord Frogmore was not, however, so entirely actuated by consideration for his brother as his stepmother thought. He was a man who took, and had taken all his life, very great care of himself. Whatever was his reason for not marrying, it was not on account of his brother John. No doubt he was aware that in all probability his brother would be his heir: but he did not dwell on that thought, or indeed contemplate the necessity of an heir at all. He took great care of his health, which was perfect, and had a system of life which secured him the utmost possible comfort and pleasure with the least possible trouble. A man who has no family to interfere with his liberty, plenty of money, perfect control of his own time and actions, and no duties to speak of, can make himself exceedingly comfortable when he sets his mind to it, and this was what Lord Frogmore had done.

He was, however, a little startled but much more amused when John announced to him his intentions. It was at the beginning of the season, before as yet Mr. Parke could have been endangered by any of the blandishments of society, and Lord Frogmore's mind, which was a very lively one, made a sweep over the country houses at which he knew his brother to have been staying. "Do I know the lady?" he asked, with *a twinkle in his eye.* He had not a very high opinion

of his brother John, in point of intellect at least, and he immediately leapt to the conclusion that it was not John's intention so much as the lady's which had decided this important step.

"I don't think so," said John. "She is of a good family, but very fond of the country, and they don't come much to town. She is a Miss Ravelstone, of Grocombe—Yorkshire people—perhaps you may never even have heard the name."

"No, I can't say I have ever heard the name," said Lord Frogmore, with his face lengthening: for there is this unconscious arrogance in people who belong to what is called society that it seems to them as if it was the same as not to exist at all, if you are not at once recognized and identified by the mention of your name.

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VOL. I.

It was not a good year. There were no horses running which excited the general expectation, nothing very good looked for, and various misfortunes had occurred in the Sillingers' usual circle. Some were ill and some were in mourning, and some had lost money—more potent reasons for refraining from their usual festivities than the buying of oxen or even the marrying of wives—and the party at Cuppland was reduced in consequence below its usual numbers. It was then that Lady Sillinger, always good-natured, suggested to her daughters that they should ask "Tisch"—which was the very unlucky diminution by which Letitia was known. Poor Tisch had few pleasures in life. She had no mother to take her about—hardly even an aunt. She would enjoy the races for their own sake, the family being so horsey—and she could come in nobody's way. The Sillinger girls were young and pretty and careless, quite unconcerned about the chance of anyone coming in their way, and very sure that Tisch Ravelstone was the last person in the world to fear as a rival. They agreed to the invitation with the utmost alacrity. Poor Tisch never went anywhere. They were as pleased to give her a holiday as if it had been of some advantage to themselves. And Letitia came much excited and very grateful, with one new dress and something done to each of the old ones to make them more presentable. The result was not very satisfactory among all the fresh toilettes from London and Paris which the Sillingers and their friends had for the races, but Letitia had the good sense to wear dresses of subdued colours which were not much remarked. She was not pretty. She *had light hair without* colour enough in it to be re-

markable, and scanty in volume—hair that never could be made to look anything. Her nose was turned up a little at the tip, and was slightly red when the weather was cold. Her lips were thin. She herself was thin, with an absence of roundness and softness which is even more disadvantageous than the want of a pretty face. She was said by everybody to be marked out for an old maid. So it may easily be perceived that Lady Sillinger was right when she said that poor Tisch would come in nobody's way.

On the other hand, John Parke was a very eligible person, highly presentable, and Lord Frogmore's heir presumptive, a man about town who knew everybody and who never could have been expected in the ordinary course of affairs to be aware of the existence of such a homely person as Tisch Ravelstone. He did not indeed notice her at all except to say good-morning when they met, and good-night when she joined the procession of ladies with candlesticks going to bed, until the third day. On that fatal morning, before the party set out for the Races, Mr. Parke had an accident. He twisted his foot upon the slippery *parquet* of the breakfast-room, which was only partially covered by the thick Turkey carpet; and though the twist was supposed not to be serious, it prevented him from accompanying the party. He was very much annoyed by this *contretemps*, but there was nothing for it but to submit. Before Lady Sillinger set out for Doncaster she had everything arranged for his comfort, so far as could be foreseen. He was put on a sofa in the library, with a table by his elbow covered with all the morning papers, with the last English novels *out of Mudie's box*, and the last yellow

books from Paris which had reached the country. There was an inkstand also, a blotting book, pens and pencils —everything a disabled man could be supposed to want.

"I would stay to take care of you," said kind Lady Sillinger, "but Sir Thomas——"

"Oh, don't think of such a thing," said John, "I shall be very comfortable."

They all came to pity and console him before they drove away—the girls in their pretty dresses, the men all spruce and fresh. He felt it a little hard upon him that after having been invited specially for the Races he should have to stay at home, and he felt very angry with the silly fashion, as he thought it for the moment, of those uncovered floors and slippery polished boards. "What the blank did people have those things for?" he said to himself. Still he did his best to grin and bear it. He settled himself on his sofa and listened to the distant sounds of the setting off, the voices and the calls to one and another. "Tom will come with us——" "No, but I am to have the vacant place in the landau." "Oh, now, Dora, there is room for you here." Dora was the youngest of the Sillingers and the one he liked best. He wondered with whom she was to be during the drive. There was another vacancy besides his own. One of the ladies had stayed behind as well as himself. He wondered which it was. If it was Mrs. Vivian, for example, he wished she would come and keep him company. But, perhaps, it was some horrid cold or other which would make her keep her bed.

The sound of their departure died away. They had *all gone. No chance of* anyone now coming into the

room to deliver John Parke from his own society. He would have to make up his mind to spend his day alone. With a great sigh, which nearly blew the paper which he held so carelessly out of his hand, John betook himself to this unusual occupation. He read the whole of the *Morning Post* and *Standard* from beginning to end, and then he began upon the *Times*. There was nothing in the papers. It is astonishing how little there is in them when you particularly want to find something that will amuse you for an hour or two. He felt inclined to fling them to the other corner of the room after he had gone over everything from the beginning to the end. And it was just at this moment, when he was thoroughly tired of himself and would have welcomed anybody, that he heard a movement at the door. He looked up very eagerly and Miss Ravelstone came in. To do her justice Letitia was quite ignorant of the accident and that Mr. Parke had been left behind. She had woke with a violent cold—so bad that she too had been compelled to give up the idea of going out. She had put on her plainest dress, knowing that no one would be back till it was time for dinner, and feeling that her gray gown was quite good enough for the governess and the children with whom she would have to lunch: she had indulged herself by having breakfast in bed, which was quite an unusual luxury. Her nose was more red than usual through the cold, her eyes were suffused with unintended tears. She did not want to see anyone. When she met John Parke's eager look, Miss Ravelstone would have liked the substantial library floor to open and swallow her up. "Oh, I beg your pardon," she cried.

"Is that you, Miss Ravelstone," said John. "Is it possible that you have not gone with the rest?"

"I had such a bad cold," stammered Tisch—for a moment she actually felt as if she had done something wrong in going into the room.

"And here am I laid by the leg—I mean by the ankle," said Mr. Parke. Even then Letitia was not fully awakened to the magnitude of the chance which her good fortune had thus put into her hands. She said she was very sorry, and for a moment stood hovering at the door uncertain whether she ought not to retire at once. But John was so much delighted to have somebody to tell his story to that he would not let her go.

"It was all those confounded boards in the breakfast-room," he said. "Why can't they have carpets all over the room. When one is abroad one makes up one's mind to that sort of thing, everything's slippery and shiny there: but in a house in Yorkshire! I came down like an elephant, Miss Ravelstone. I wonder you did not feel the whole house shake."

"I was in bed," said Letitia, "nursing a bad cold."

"A bad cold is a nasty thing," said John, "but it is not so bad as a twist in the foot. You can move about at least—and here am I stuck on a sofa—not able even to ring the bell."

"I will ring the bell for you with pleasure, Mr. Parke."

"That's just one of the last things one would ask a lady to do," cried John, "and I don't know why you should ring the bell for me. If the fellow was here I *don't know what I* want. I couldn't tell him to sit down

and talk to me. It's such a bore to be left here alone, and everyone else away."

"I'll sit down and talk to you if you like," said Tisch, with a laugh. Her eyes recovered in the most marvellous manner. She felt inclined to sneeze, but shook it off. She began to wake up and see what was before her. Heir presumptive to Lord Frogmore! She had made up her mind that she was likely to meet somebody of importance on this great visit—and had no intention of neglecting any opportunity—though she had never even supposed, never hoped, to have such a captive delivered into her hands in this easy way.

"I wish you would," said John. "I'm afraid I'm not very lively, and this confounded ankle hurts; but perhaps we can find something to talk about. Are you fond of playing games, Miss Ravelstone? I wonder if there are any here?"

"There is a chess board, I know," said Letitia; "but I don't know much about chess: and there's bezique, and I have a 'go bang' of my own."

"Oh, if it's not too much to ask, please fetch the go bang," cried John.

Miss Letitia nodded her head, she disappeared, and in two minutes returned a little out of breath with the box containing that intellectual amusement in her hand. She had done something to herself in the meantime, John felt, but though he was trained in the things that ladies "do" to make themselves more attractive he could not make out what it was. They played about twenty games at go bang, and time which had been so leaden-footed flew. But everything exhausts itself after a while. When an hour and a half had passed thus, John began



to fidget again, and wonder what o'clock it was, and if it would soon be time for luncheon—which was at two in this late house: and it was now only one o'clock, another lingering hour.

"Should you like," said Miss Ravelstone, "to hear a great secret about Cobweb?" Now Cobweb was the favourite for the next day's race, and John Parke had, as he would himself have said, a pot of money on that horse.

"Anything about the race? Why, to be sure, of all things in the world," he said.

It has already been mentioned that the Ravelstones were all horsey to the last degree except Tisch, who was not of that persuasion; but she had heard horses talked of all her life, and while she entered into the biography of Cobweb, John Parke listened with eager eyes.

CHAPTER II.

THIS was how it all began; how it went on was more than anyone could say, certainly not John himself, who woke up one morning to feel himself an engaged man with a more startled sensation than words could express. He knew that it was all right; that Letitia had been everything that was nice and proper, and had even spoken humbly of her own merits as not good enough for such a distinguished person as himself; but what were the steps that lead up to it, or how it had come about, John could give no clear account. He spoke of the incident with a kind of awe. How it happened, or what had come to pass before it happened, was something too great for him, which he could not follow; but from the very first moment he was aware that it was, and could neither be got rid of nor explained away. John was not a very triumphant lover. He was a little subdued indeed, scarcely knowing how to announce it to his friends; but Letitia took it upon her instantly to bear his burdens, and it was she who told Lady Sillinger, who told everybody, and so that matter was got over. I do not mean to say that it was all settled during the Doncaster week at the Sillingers; for however Letitia might have felt, John could never have been got to be so prompt as that. But another benevolent lady who saw how the tide was turning, and

who thought it a great pity that a girl should not have her chance, invited Letitia and also John, who happened to have no other pressing engagement, and in a fortnight more great things were done. I have said before that he never could tell how it was, but he very soon came to understand that it was all settled, and that it necessitated a great many other arrangements. One of them was the conversation with Lord Frogmore with which this story began. John Parke was still a little dazed and overawed by the great event when he informed his brother, and the manner in which Lord Frogmore at first received his confidence at once bewildered and disconcerted him. But afterwards everything came right, and the arrangements made were satisfactory in every way. Lord Frogmore paid his brother's debts. He gave Miss Ravelstone a very handsome wedding present, and he made such an allowance as became the conditions and expectations of his heir. He did, indeed, everything that could have been expected in the circumstances. He did not say "I shall never marry, and of course you will have everything when I am gone," which Letitia thought he ought to have said, considering all things; but he acted exactly as if he had said this. You do not make your younger brother an allowance of three thousand a year unless your intentions towards him are of the most decided character; nor, indeed, was it in the least probable that anything could come to snatch the cup from John Parke's lips.

When the time came for the wedding it was discovered by all parties that Grocombe was too far off among the fells—too much out of order, too bare, and —*in a word*—too shabby for such a performance.

Letitia had felt this from the very first moment, and had been strongly conscious of it when she wrote to Lady Sillinger on the very evening on which the engagement took place. She had told her kind friend that she was the happiest girl in the world, and that nobody knew how much there was in John; but even at that early period when she had said something modestly of her lover's ardour and desire to have the marriage soon, she added: "But oh! dear Lady Sillinger, when I think of Grocombe and old Mr. Hill, our vicar, my heart sinks. How can I ever—ever be married there?"

As Lady Sillinger entered with great enthusiasm into a marriage which she might be said to have made, Miss Ravelstone had many opportunities of repeating this sentiment, and the conclusion of all was that this kind-hearted woman invited her young friend to be married from Cuppland if she pleased. "It will be such fun for the children," Lady Sillinger said. It was therefore amid all the surroundings of a great house that Lord Frogmore first saw his brother's bride. John did not ask any questions as to the impression Letitia had made. He had a dull kind of sense that it might be better to ask no questions. He was not himself at all deceived about her appearance, nor did he expect his friends to admire her. He took the absence of all enthusiasm on their part with judicious calm. He was not himself enthusiastic, but he had a sober satisfaction in the consciousness that his income was more than doubled, and that he was likely to be very comfortable until the time should come when Frogmore would in the course of nature die. And then, of course, he knew very well what the succession would be. Letitia knew

it too. She had read a hundred times over every detail in that paragraph in the Peerage. She managed to get a copy of the county history and study everything that was known about the family of the Parkes and their possessions. She had even managed to find an old dressmaker who had once been maid to one of the ladies of the family, and who told her about the jewels which must eventually be hers. By dint of industry and constant questioning Letitia had discovered everything about the Parkes before she became one of them. And it was all very satisfactory—more so to her, perhaps, than to any other of the family. John's mother was not at all pleased, but what did it matter about that? She was only the Dowager, and, except so far as her own little savings were concerned, had no power.

When Lord Frogmore first saw his sister-in-law she was in all the importance and excitement of a young lady on the eve of marriage surrounded by dressmakers and by presents. The dressmakers were many and obsequious, the presents were few and did not make a very great show. This was got over, however, by the explanation that most of her wedding gifts had been sent to Grocombe, and that the show at Cuppland was only accidental, not contributed by her old family friends, by whom, of course, the most important were sure to be supplied. The head of the family of the Parkes, when he was asked into Lady Sillinger's boudoir to make acquaintance with his sister-in-law, had a small packet in his hand, to which he saw her eyes turn almost before she looked at himself. Her eyes were light, and not very bright by nature, but there was a *glow in them as they* shot that glance at the packet in

his hand. Did she think it was but a small packet? Lord Frogmore could not help asking himself. The jeweller's box, which he carried done up in silver paper, thus became the chief and first thought on both sides. Letitia was in a pale pink dress which was not becoming to her. It made her thin hair and colourless complexion more colourless than ever. It threw up the faint flush on the tip of her nose. She rose quickly, and came forward holding out her hand, and rising suggestively on her toes. Did she mean to kiss him? the old gentleman asked himself, which was certainly what Letitia meant to do; but in such a salutation in such circumstances the initiative should at least be taken by the elderly brother-in-law, not by the bride. She stood suspended, however, for a moment, as it were in the air, with that expectation, and then resumed her seat with a little shake out of her draperies like a ruffled bird.

"I am very glad to make your acquaintance, Miss Ravelstone," said Lord Frogmore.

"Oh, I am sure so am I," said Letitia. "Dear John's brother."

She simpered and held down her head a little, while Lord Frogmore did not know whether to laugh or be angry. He was not accustomed to this way of stating the relationship.

"Yes, to be sure dear John is my brother," he said, "and as I don't doubt you are going to make him a very happy man, the family will all be much indebted to you, Miss Ravelstone. In view of the coming event I have brought my little offering." He began to open it out, fumbling at the string in a way which was very

tantalizing to Letitia, who would have liked to pounce upon it and take it out of his hand.

"Let me cut it," she said, producing scissors from the dressmaker's box which was on the table, and once more her eyes gave a gleam enough to set that troublesome paper on fire.

"Thank you, but I like to save the string," said the old peer. He felt himself, however, though he rather liked to tantalize her, that all this delay would make his present look still more unimportant in her eyes. It was a pearl necklace with a pendant of pearls and diamonds, and it had in reality cost him a good deal, and was more valuable than Letitia thought. She drew a long breath when it was at last disclosed.

"Oh!" she said (adding within herself "it's not diamonds after all.") "Oh, how very pretty; oh, how sweetly pretty; oh, what a delightful little necklace. Oh, Lord Frogmore, it looks like someone younger and much, much prettier than me."

"I am very glad you like it," said Lord Frogmore.

"Oh, Lord Frogmore, any girl would like it. I am sure it is quite beautiful. I thought married ladies didn't wear pearls; but only just to keep in the box and look at it would do one good. It is the loveliest little thing I ever saw."

"You are mistaken I am sure about the married ladies, Miss Ravelstone."

"Am I?" she said, looking up at him with engaging candor, "I am so inexperienced I don't know, but someone told me so; dull stones for girls and bright ones for *married* ladies is what I was told; but I daresay that *was all wrong and you* know best——"

"I really don't know what you mean by dull stones," said Lord Frogmore stiffly.

"Oh, I mean pearls and turquoises and such things: and the others are rubies and emeralds and diamonds; but I don't at all understand such questions, I only know they are lovely. How am I to thank you, Lord Frogmore?"

"I am quite sufficiently thanked if you are pleased, Miss Ravelstone."

"Oh, but that is so cold," said Letitia. "I know what I should do if it was my father, or my uncle, or any old friend. But when it is Lord Frogmore——" She stopped with the same arrested motion which had startled him so when they had first met. Decidedly the girl meant to kiss him. He started rather abruptly to his feet and made her a very elaborate bow.

"I am more than repaid, Miss Ravelstone, if you are good enough to be pleased with my little present," he said.

"Oh! please call me Letitia—at least," said the too affectionate bride.

If Lady Sillinger had not come forward at this moment to relieve the strain of the situation by boundless praise and admiration of the necklace, Frogmore did not know to what extremities he might have been driven. He withdrew as soon as he could without any demonstrations of tenderness—and hurrying through the suite of rooms came, to his confusion, upon Lady Frogmore, his stepmother, John's mother, a woman a little younger than himself, and of whom he had always been a little afraid. She was very large, as so many ladies become in their maturity, and had a way of constantly fanning

herself, which was disturbing to most men and to her stepson most of all. But as they had naturally perceived each other some way off there was no avoiding an encounter. The dowager Lady Frogmore had a voice not unlike a policeman's rattle, and as she spoke her large bosom heaved as if with the effort to bring it forth.

"Well, Frogmore," she said, "you have been paying your respects to the bride?"

"I have indeed," he replied, with much gravity, and a nervous glance behind him.

"You look, my dear Frogmore, as if you were running away."

"Something like it, I don't deny. I—I thought she would have kissed me," he said, with a burst of feeling. It might have seemed comical to some people, but it was not at all comical to Lord Frogmore.

The dowager Lady Frogmore stopped fanning herself. "She kissed me," she said, in sepulchral tones; "actually got up upon her toes, and, before I knew what she was about, kissed me. I never was so taken by surprise in my life. If there is any kissing to be done it is the family, certainly, that should begin."

"That is quite my opinion," said Frogmore; "but I suppose she means it for the best."

Lady Frogmore shook her head. She shook it so long and so persistently that the flowers upon her bonnet began to shed little bits of feather and tinsel. "Frogmore," she said, solemnly, "mark my words. She will lead John a life!"

"Let's hope not," said his brother.

"Oh! don't tell me. Men never understand. She *will lead him a life.*"

"At all events it is his own doing," said Frogmore.

"I don't believe it is his own doing. He could not give me a rational account of it when I asked him. I believe she's a scheming minx, and this Lady Sillinger's a designing woman."

"What good will it do her? She's got daughters of her own."

"That is just the wonder of it," said Lady Frogmore, nodding her head. "If it had been one of her own daughters I would not have said a word. Her own daughters are well enough, but this girl! My poor dear John has been made a victim, Frogmore. He has been made a victim. I wish he had broken his leg or something before he came to this house."

"Nonsense," said Lord Frogmore, "he might have met her anywhere else as well as in this house."

"It's all a deep laid scheme," continued the dowager, behind her fan. "What that woman has against my poor dear John I can't tell, but it is she that has done it. And mark my words, Frogmore——"

"How many more words am I to mark," said Frogmore peevishly—then he added, in the freedom of close relationship: "All you say about poor Lady Sillinger is the merest nonsense. She's as good a woman as ever lived."

"Mark my words, Frogmore," repeated the dowager, "that girl will never rest till she has got you out of the way."

"Me!" he laughed: "set your mind at rest," he said, "I am not in her way at all. She means to make a friend of me."

"She'll make a friend of you, and then she'll make

you something quite different. She will never be happy," said Lady Frogmore, "till she has got us all out of the way."

"Oh! come, come! We don't live in the fourteenth century," Frogmore said.

And next day, notwithstanding all these prognostications of harm, John and Letitia were married, and set off for their honeymoon. And whatever her intentions might be there was no longer any possibility of shutting out the Honorable Mrs. John Parke from the amenities of the family. She was kissed. She was blessed. Old slippers were flung after her, and if she had been the most desirable wife in the world, no more could have been done by the family to put the best face upon this event before the eyes of a too quick-sighted world.

CHAPTER III.

NOTWITHSTANDING the dissatisfaction of his family, John Parke began his married life very comfortably, and it is doubtful whether he had ever been so happy in his life before. Lord Frogmore had let the newly married pair have a house of his in Berkshire, in a good hunting neighbourhood, and not very far from town. John was by no means a great hunting man, but it is a respectable occupation to fall back upon when one has nothing else to do, and he was able to keep up his character and take a moderate interest in all that was going on without very much hard riding or sacrifice of comfort. His wife rode with him to the admiration of all the hunting field. But it was not in that way that Letitia meant to gain distinction. She had known too much about horses in her earlier days. She did not intend to be a hunting lady. Still it is always something to be known for one of the best horsewomen in your county. If you do not hunt after that it shows that you have higher aspirations. And it was very good for John to know that there was one thing at least which would have made any man proud of his wife. What Letitia was much more anxious about was that everybody should call. She procured a list of all the county families within reach, and carefully compared their names *with those on the* visiting cards that were

left at Greenpark. And gradually her high aspirations were carried out. Gradually, not all at once, but under the weighty influence of the peerage and the hunting, most people came. Letitia found herself at the apex of the happiness she most desired, when she ascertained finally that she knew everybody—scarcely one was left out, and those who were left out were the insignificant people for whose opinion nobody cared.

She made a capital wife. She knew a great deal about housekeeping and how to make a little go a long way, and as she was very quick and kept her eyes wide open wherever she went, she very soon picked up those minutiæ of comfort and domestic luxury which were not understood at Grocombe. Grocombe, in fact, passed alway altogether like a dissolving view. Sometimes when she sat in the boudoir which everybody said she had made so delightful, with its soft chairs and mossy carpets, and bewildering drapery, there would come before Letitia's eyes a vision of the shabby parlour at home with its horsehair sofa and thin Kidderminster. The curtains were maroon rep in that family abode. The cover on the table was red and blue worsted: there was not a cosy chair in the place. It is true that there was a drawing-room in Grocombe, but everything in it was falling to pieces and it was never used. What a house to have been brought up in! And what a difference between Tisch Ravelstone, the hard-riding squire's neglected daughter, who had never been educated, or dressed, or looked after by any one, whom the parson's wife had been sorry for, who had been invited to the vicarage out of kindness, who had once thought *the vicar's son* when he returned from Oxford the most

splendid of young persons, and the Honorable Mrs. John Parke in her own beautiful boudoir, with her fine dresses and respectful servants and luxurous prosperity! What a difference! Letitia never permitted it to be seen or even divined that such luxury was new to her. But sometimes there would gleam before her a fading dissolving vision of that other life, and she would ask herself was it possible? Could it ever have been? To go back to such a state of affairs now would be the most horrible misfortune. She said to herself that she would rather die. It is true that the moors were glorious round about that Yorkshire house, but Letitia had seen too much of them to care for the moors: and the stables were admirably arranged, the pride of the district, but Letitia had seen a great deal too much of them and hated stables. And when she thought of the miry ways through which she used to tramp in her Wellington boots and short skirts, and the wintry blighted fir wood, all blown one way as if the trees were shabby pilgrims going to the west, which surrounded the house, and the garden in which a few straggling rose bushes and old-fashioned flowers formed a respectful border to the cabbages, Letitia drew a long breath. Oh-h! she said to herself. What a difference! what a difference! But this breath of wondering transport was only breathed when she sat alone in her boudoir and John was well out of the way, and could not look up with an "Eh? did you speak?"

There were some things, however, not so easily dropped as Grocombe—and these were its inhabitants. Letitia had five brothers, such a number for a young woman on her promotion, whose aspirations were so far

removed from anything they could understand. They could all ride like centaurs, they could doctor horses as well as any vet., harness them as well as any groom, and were as conversant with the pedigrees of their quadruped nobility as the Garter-King-at-Arms is with the precedence and qualifications of dukes and earls. Letitia was not unaware that knowledge of this kind is sometimes very valuable, and that in the society of a hunting country it is much esteemed. She knew there were distinguished houses in the neighbourhood in which the stud-groom was a person highly prized for his conversation and social qualities; and on such a dreadful emergency as the appearance of Will, or Jack, or Ted, or Harry at Greenpark, she had already settled in her own mind how to make the best of their qualities: but it was a thought which made her shiver. She had made up her mind that intercourse with her old home was a thing to be gradually dropped altogether. Heaven be praised there were no sisters. Had there been sisters they would not have been so easily shaken off, they would probably have insisted upon sharing Tisch's good luck, and getting "their chance" also through her means. "Tisch!" think only of hearing that name again ringing through the house in the stentorian voice of one of the boys! If there were no more than this to be avoided it would be enough. Letitia put her hands up to her ears as if to shut out the horrible sound. No, fortunately, nobody here, nobody in her new world had ever heard that dreadful name: the Sillingers, indeed —but they were people who knew better than to perpetuate such an injury. And on the whole Letitia *thought it advisable* to drop them also. They were

so far off. The north of Yorkshire is a long way from Berks. It is much further off than either place is, for instance, from London. Mrs. John Parke lamented in her new neighbourhood that she was so far off from the old; but on the whole it was a dispensation of Providence with which she was well pleased.

In the meantime Letitia began without delay to do her duty in the station to which she had been so fortunately called. She produced with much fortitude and pride a son and heir at the end of the first year, and after that judiciously, and not with too much haste, other little Parkes, one after the other, two boys and two girls, thus establishing the family upon a broad and sturdy basis, which precluded all fear of extinction to the family honours. Three sons—such a thing had not been known in the Frogmore family since the creation of the title, which was not, however, a very old one. There could be no doubt that Lord Frogmore was pleased. He sent Mrs. John some of the family diamonds, those jewels which she had so coveted, but which were by no means as splendid as she had hoped, after the first of these events—and he made a great many jokes with his brother as the family increased. But, in fact, he was very considerate indeed, making more than jokes, a considerable addition to John's income, and also giving up to his brother the house in Mount Street, which Mrs. John had so long coveted. It is very evident, therefore, that Letitia's course of prosperity for the first eight years of her married life was as nearly perfect as falls to the lot of woman. Her new family had forgotten that she was plain—they all had a respect for her as a very clever *woman*, who had done her duty

by the race. She was not, perhaps, all that they could have desired; "not what I should have chosen for my dear boy," said Lady Frogmore. "A little sharp for my taste—but then my taste had nothing to do with it," said the old lord. But a woman against whom nothing was to be said. Her first season in London—the first season in which she had actually a house of her own, and could be said to take the place which the future Lady Frogmore had a right to aspire to, was not, indeed, triumphant—Letitia did not aspire to triumphs—but it was, as all her progress had been, a gradual and steady advance. She did not wish to take an insecure place among the fast duchesses and the wild millionaires. She disapproved of all the votaries of dissipation. "We come to town to meet our friends, and pay our duty to our Sovereign, and see what is going on," she said, "but our delight is in our country home." She had said 'ome at first, as, indeed, many very well-bred persons do; but Letitia had outgrown any weakness of that kind. And she was making her way. When she met the Sillingers now she was in a position to patronize them. The girls had not made very good marriages; and what was Lady Sillinger, after all, but the wife of a country baronet, well off, but not very rich, with a nice house and very hospitable in their way, but not a great country place. The Honble. Mrs. John Parke, the future Lady Frogmore, was very good-natured, and glad to be of use to her old friends.

There was another old friend who at this period was brought to her mind by an unexpected encounter at one of the exhibitions, which is a place where the *poor may meet* the rich without anything surprising

being in it. Letitia, in the course of her cursory survey of the pictures, found before her a group which she recognized—or rather it would be more just to say she recognized one of the members of it. She looked, she turned away her head, she looked again. Yes, certainly, it was! it was! the very vicar's daughter who had always been kind to Letitia Ravelstone, who had been held up to her as a model, whose neat frocks and pinafores it had been a vain effort to emulate. The name of the vicar's daughter was Mary Hill, one of the most commonplace of names, yet capable of no such horrible travesty as that nickname of Tisch, which had been the burden of Letitia's youth—yet she had always been prettier than Letitia, as well as more neat and carefully dressed. Mrs. John Parke stood in her fashionable London garments, in what might be called the height of her dignified maternal—but not too maternal—position (for Letitia had preserved her figure and was still slim) and gazed upon the companion of her youth. Miss Hill looked forty, though she was not quite so much as that. She was dressed in a grey alpaca, very simply made. She had a close little bonnet of the same colour, tied with pink ribbons under her chin. She was as neat as she used to be in the old days when she was held up as an example to Tisch Ravelstone. She was accompanied by two elderly ladies of homely respectability, one of whom called to her continually, "Mary, Mary, you have not looked at this." They were doing the honours of the pictures to her, not sparing her one. She had a catalogue in her hand, but between that and the lady who called Mary, Mary, and the other who stopped before all the worst pictures and said, with a

wave of her hand, "This is one that has been a great deal talked about," their gentle country cousin was evidently a little confused. She smiled, and allowed herself to be dragged in two directions at once. Letitia stood and watched with a sensation which was very mingled. There was good in it and there was evil, a sense of triumph which so swelled her bosom that had her dress not been so perfectly fitted some of the buttons must certainly have burst, but along with this a certain sense of kindness, of pleasure in such a kind face. If it had been anybody but Mary Hill not even the delight of showing how different she herself was from Tisch Ravelstone would have made Mrs. Parke pause. But a softer impulse touched her breast. She stood still where she was until Mary, in one of the many gyrations she had to make to please her companions, turned round full upon her and recognized her with a start and a cry. Letitia, in the excitement of the moment, actually forgave her old friend, whose cry was "Tisch!"

"It is surely Mary Hill," she said, advancing in her turn, with all the magnificence of which she was capable, and that was no small matter. "I have been looking at you for five minutes wondering; but it is you. And you have not changed a bit."

"Oh, no; how should I change? But you; now I look at you again I wonder that I recognized you at all. It was the first glance. I felt it could be no one else."

"It makes a great difference to be married and have a number of children," said Letitia with genial *dignity*. "*You* have never married, Mary."

"Oh, no," said Mary, with a faint laugh.

"And are you just at home—as you used to be?"

"Just at home—as I used to be. We are all older; the boys are out in the world, and little Fanny too, as a governess; but Agnes and I are just the same, taking care of father and mother."

"They can't want two of you to take care of them."

"That is true," said Mary, with a faint change of colour, "but we had no education—we elder ones: and we can't teach, and there's nothing else for a girl to do."

"A girl!" said Letitia under her breath, looking at Mary in her gentle middle-agedness from top to toe. But she perceived that the two elderly ladies, who had hitherto kept at a distance overawed by her fashionable appearance, were now consulting together with evident intention of advancing, so she added quickly, "I am so glad to have seen you. Come and see me, please, in the morning before one, at 300, Mount street, Berkeley Square — the park end — will you? Come to-morrow, Mary, please."

"I will indeed," said Mary, with fervour. "It is the finest thing I have seen in London, dear Tishy, the face of an old friend: and as kind as ever," she said with a glance of tender gratitude. She had not perhaps quite expected, nor had Letitia expected, that any such soft sentiment should have arisen in her bosom, if truth be told.

"Don't call me that, for heaven's sake," cried Letitia, waving her hand as she hurried away. And so the two elderly ladies were balked, and Mrs. Parke left the

exhibition with a new plan taking form in her mind—a plan which would be a great kindness, yet very useful to herself—a plan which was to produce fruits of an importance almost awful to Letitia, yet at this moment altogether hidden, and the very possibility of them, from her eyes.

CHAPTER IV.

Mrs. Parke went home with a little excitement in her mind caused by the sight of this friend of her youth. The familiar form brought back still more distinctly all that was past and its extraordinary contrast with all that was present. Mary Hill in the clothes that she must have been wearing all this long time ("I am sure I know that frock," Letitia said to herself), afforded the most perfect example of all the difference that had arisen in her own life. But this was not her only thought. Perhaps her mind was moved by a little touch of old kindness. Such darts of light will come through the most opaque blanks of a self-regarding life. Letitia was very practical, and it seemed to her that to keep two women like Mary and Agnes Hill in the depths of the country with nothing to do but to take care of the vicar and the parish, which one could do amply, while she herself stood much in need of a companion and help, was the greatest waste of material possible. Her active mind leaped in a moment to all the advantages of such a visitor in the house as Mary Hill, an old friend with whom it would not be necessary to stand on ceremony, who could be sent about whenever there was need for her, who would look after the children, and "do" the flowers and make herself useful. And what an advantage it would be to her! She would

see the world; she would make acquaintance with the best society. She might perhaps meet some one; some old clergyman or family doctor who would make her an offer. The idea took possession of Letitia. It would be such a good thing. She spoke of it to John when they met at luncheon. "Should you mind if I asked an old friend to pay us a long visit?" she said.

"I——mind? I never interfere with your visitors," said John, surprised. He added, however, with a little surprise when he thought of it: "I never knew you cared for old friends."

"They are generally a bore," said Mrs. Parke; "they remind you of things you want to forget and people you hate. But not this one. It is Mary Hill. She is the vicar's daughter at Grocombe. Poor people, they are very poor. It will be a kindness to them. A mouth to feed in such a house is a great matter."

"It is very kind of you, Letitia, to think of it."

"Oh, as for that! and she would be so useful to me. I do feel sometimes the burden of all I have to do—the housekeeping—to make a good show on such a limited income, and to keep up one's social duties; and then the children always wanting something. I don't know how I have borne it so long without any help."

"But I don't see," said John, "how having a friend in the house would mend that."

"No," said Letitia with a sigh; "I did not expect you to see it. But so long as I see it!—all I want is to make sure that you won't go on as so many men do. 'How long is that Miss Hill going to stay? I can never *say a word to you* without that Miss Hill hearing every-

thing! Is that Miss Hill to be always here?' Now you must have heard men going on just so, making their wives' lives a burden."

"I hope I shall never do that," said John, mildly.

"Mind you don't," said Letitia. And that was all that was said. But when Miss Hill came next morning with a pretty flush of pleasure on her face, and her grey dress looking so prim and old-maidish, and everything about her showing a life arrested just at the point where Letitia had left her—Letitia who had made so much progress—Mrs. Parke's resolution became firmer than ever. She showed her visitor all over the house, apologizing for its small size and imperfections. "We must put up with many things," she said, "in our present circumstances, you know. Frogmore is very nice to us, but so long as he lives we can only have the second place."

"I wish I had only a hundred times as much to put up with," said Mary, smiling. "It all looks very delightful to me."

"You should see Greenpark," said Letitia. "We have a great deal more room there. But we are only in town for a short season, and, of course, I don't bring all the children. Yes, baby is just about ten months. They are all troublesome children. They give me a great deal to do. I often think I shall die of it if it goes on long. And there you are, Mary, a lady of leisure at home with next to nothing to do."

Mary's countenance changed. "I have more than you think," she said, "but not in your way."

"Oh, no, not in my way. When you are not married you can form no idea of the troubles one has.

But I do wonder you should stay at home when there is so little for you all. Your poor mother must grudge it so. Two daughters to feed and clothe and no likelihood of any change."

"Oh, Tishy, it is cruel to tell me so! Don't I feel it to the bottom of my heart?"

"Don't call me by that horrible name. If I was you I should certainly do something for myself. Who were the two—— whom you were with at the exhibition?"

"It was my aunt——and a friend of mine. They live together," said Mary.

"You should go and live with them," said Letitia, boldly.

Mary shook her head. "My aunt is as poor as we are at home. She has asked me for a short visit, that is all she can do. But please Tis—— I mean Letitia, don't make me wretched to-day. I want to get a little pleasure out of this day."

"If I make you wretched it is for your good," said Letitia. "If you have only come for a short visit it is not worth your while. Your railway fare would cost you more than all the relief it would be at home."

"They were glad I should have the change," said Mary, "but I'm afraid what you say is true, and it was perhaps selfish to come."

"I should say it was very selfish to come if it's only for a short visit. But you are dreadfully thoughtless people about money and always were. If I did not count up everything and calculate whether it was worth *while, I don't know* what I should do. Now getting to

town and back again from Yorkshire must have cost you two pounds at least, even second class——"

"I came third class," said Mary, much downcast.

"But I am sure it cost you two pounds—why, there must have been a cab from the station, and there will be a cab back again to the station, and I should not at all wonder if you gave the porter sixpence, though probably he is much better off than you are. And how long are you to stay with your aunt?"

"A fortnight," said Mary almost inaudibly, hanging her head.

"A fortnight! You don't imagine it can cost your father and mother a pound a week to keep you at home? Ten shillings is the very outside I should say. Well, then, you have thrown away a whole pound on this visit, and probably you got a new frock for it, or a bonnet or something. Oh, that is not the way to get on in the world! At this rate you will always be poor——"

"They were very glad I should have the change," said Mary, pale but plucking up a little courage. "They don't count up every penny like that. Oh, Ti—Letitia, I am sure you mean to be kind; but when you put things before one like that it is like flaying one alive! For what can I do? I can't be a governess, and there is nothing else that I can be——"

"You might have married," said Letitia, "if you had played your cards as you ought."

At this Mary gave her friend a startled glance and grew very red, but then turned away her head and said nothing. Letitia saw and understood, but took no notice. She *went on*—

"You might have married old Captain Taylor when he came home from abroad. And what a nice house he had, and plenty of money, and only think how comfortable you might have been. But you just threw him into Cecilia Foster's hands—I don't mean to reproach you, Mary; but it is all the same sort of thing. You never calculate beforehand: now how are you to make up that pound?"

Letitia said these words with the greatest deliberation and emphasis, looking her friend almost sternly in the face. And to poor Mary a pound was no small matter. She had never thought of it before in this light, and an almost hysterical constriction came into her throat. Make up a pound! It is but a small sum of money, but she did not know how to do it any more than she knew how to fly.

When Letitia had thus brought her friend down to the very earth, she suddenly made a rush at her and gave her a little dab of a kiss. "I will tell you, you dear old thing," she said; "you shall come and pay a long visit to me."

"Tishy! I mean Letitia, oh what do you mean?" said Mary in her surprise.

Letitia threatened her with a forefinger. "I will kill you if you call me that again! What do I mean? I mean just what I say. You shall come and pay me a long, long visit—as long as you like—as long as—you live—or let's say till you are married," cried Mrs. Parke with a somewhat mocking laugh.

"You know very well I shall never marry," said Mary, reproachfully.

"*Well, never mind*—wait till you have seen all the

people at Greenpark. You shall come to me as soon as you have done your fortnight with your aunt, and you shall go down with us when we go to the country, and you will keep me company when John is away, and talk to me when I am lonely, and make friends with the children. That will be worth your while, not like a fortnight in London, where you must always be spending shillings and sixpences. Now is it settled, or must you write home and ask if you may come? For it is a real long visit I shall want."

"Oh, Letitia," said Mary, with tears in her eyes, "is it possible you can be so very, very kind, when we have not met for years, and when I thought——"

"What did you think? That I had forgotten my old friends? I am one that never, never forgets," said Mrs. Parke. "The first moment that I set eyes upon you I said to myself, 'It's Mary! and she must come to me for a long, long visit.' I can see no use in asking people for a fortnight. It only costs money, and it is not a bit of relief at home."

"I am sure you are quite right," said Mary. "I have been thinking so myself; but then they all thought it would be a change, and though I am fonder of Grocombe than of any place in the world——"

"You are a hypocrite, Mary," said Letitia. "I never was fond of Grocombe at all. It is the dullest place in England—there is never anything going on. Oh, here is Mr. Parke, whom you don't know yet. John, this is Miss Hill, who is coming to us for a long visit. I told you what a dear friend she was of mine."

"How do you do, Miss Hill?" said John, and then he added, the only thing it occurred to him to say to

a stranger. "What fine weather we are having. Have you been in the Park to-day?"

This was how it came about that Mary Hill became an inmate of Greenpark. She paid Letitia a long—very long—visit, so long that it looked as if it never would end. Mrs. Parke stood on no ceremony at all with her friend. She confided her children to her with as much freedom as if she had been the nursery governess. She suggested to her that her place was wanted at table when there was a dinner party, and her room when the house was very full for the shooting. She made use of her to interview the housekeeper, and to write the *menus* for dinner. Mary soon came to occupy the position which is sacred to the poor relation —the unsalaried dependent in a house. She sometimes replaced the mistress of the house, sometimes the nurse, sometimes the lady's maid. She was always at hand and ready whatever was wanted. "Oh, ask Miss Hill! Don't, for heaven's sake, bother me about everything," was what Letitia learned to say. She made the children's clothes, because she liked needlework. She arranged the bouquets for the table because she was so fond of flowers. She even helped the maid to arrange any changes that were necessary in Letitia's toilettes because she had so much taste. Mary was a very long time in finding out why it was that her friend was, as she said, "so kind." Perhaps she never entirely discovered the reason of it. She began, when her visit had extended to months, to discover that Letitia was not, perhaps, so invariably kind as she had supposed. But that was a very natural discovery, for nobody is *perfect; and to do* Mrs. Parke justice, it was only when

there was a very large party for the shooting, or a very important dinner, that Mary was ever disturbed either in her room or her place. When anything was said of Mary's visit coming to an end, Letitia was in despair. "Oh, Mary, how could you go and leave me when you see how much I have to do? Oh, Mary, how could you desert the children, who are so fond of you? And don't you think it is far better to be here, costing them nothing, than to go back to be a burden at home?" These mingled arguments overcame the humble-minded woman. Though it was bitter to hear it said that she was a burden at home, no doubt it was true. And thus it happened that she stayed, always under pretence of being on a long visit, an unremunerated, much exercised upper servant at Letitia's beck and call, for one whole long year.

It is true that nobody would have divined what confusion of all Mrs. Parke's plans was to result from this expedient of hers; yet it was apparent enough to various people concerned that she was less long-sighted than usual upon this occasion—apparent, that is to say, after the event which proved it. There could be no doubt that Mary's presence in the house made an opening for other persons to appear who were likely to be much less acceptable to Letitia, and whom, indeed, she had carefully kept at arm's length up to this time, when that brilliant idea of seizing a domestic slave for herself entered into her mind. The world could never get on at all if the selfish people in it were always long-sighted and never forgot themselves. But for the first year all went very well—so well that Mrs. Parke was used to congratulate herself on her own cleverness and

success. And everybody was pleased: Mary, who wrote home that she was so happy to be able to save dear Letitia in many little things, and it was quite a pleasure to do anything for her; and the people at the Vicarage, who were never weary of saying how kind Mrs. Parke was to Mary, and how many nice people she saw, and what a delightful, long visit she was having; and John, who declared that Miss Hill was the most good-natured and the nicest to the children of anyone he had ever seen. An arrangement which brought so much satisfaction to all concerned must surely have been an admirable arrangement. And how it could lead to any upsetting of the life and purpose of the Honourable Mrs. John Parke, or check the full breeze of prosperity that filled her sails, or in any way endanger her career, was what nobody could have divined. But the great drawback of all mortal chances and successes is that you never can tell, nor can the wisest of mankind, what strange things may be effected in a single day.

CHAPTER V.

It was in the beginning of the shooting-season, when birds were still plentiful and the best of the sportsmen visitors were come or coming, that Letitia was one evening startled by hearing of the arrival of a gentleman, who was one more than the number expected. Such a thing had been known before; for John's invitations were sometimes a little vague, and he occasionally made a mistake; but it was particularly annoying on this occasion, because Mrs. Parke had not been at home for tea, and, therefore, was not at hand to place the unexpected guest.

"The only thing I could do, ma'am, in the circumstances," said the butler, "was to refer to Miss Hill, and she said the gentleman must have her room; so I put him in Miss Hill's room."

"You were quite right, Saunders, since Miss Hill was so kind; and I daresay it will be all right. But you have not told me who the gentleman was."

The butler made a little pause—a respectable family servant never forgets that every family has its secrets. He coughed discreetly behind his hand. "I did not ask the gentleman's name, ma'am—Miss Hill seemed to know him very well."

"Miss Hill—knew him very well!" Astonishment and a certain consternation came into Letitia's face. But

she recollected herself, perceiving Saunders' look of extreme discretion, which is always an alarming thing. "I have no doubt it is all right," she said, with great self-possession, "and you have done exactly what you ought to have done in referring to Miss Hill—send up someone to my room with a cup of good tea. One never gets tea one can drink out of one's own house."

Mrs. Parke repeated to herself, "Someone Mary knows," under her breath. She was momentarily disturbed. Could it be a piece of presumption on Mary's part bringing in someone she knew? But this was so incredible that Letitia dismissed the idea, laying it all upon the broad shoulders of John. "He must have made a mistake again," she said to herself. She was late, everyone had gone to dress for dinner, and the mistress of the house only lingered for a moment in the drawing-room to see that all was in order, to give a little pull to the curtains, and a little push to the chairs such as the mistress of the house always finds necessary when she is expecting guests, breaking the air of inevitable primness which the best of servants are apt to give. She looked round to see that all was right, and then she went upstairs to her room to dress. Mary was standing on the stairs at the end of the corridor which led to the nursery, evidently waiting for her. "Oh, can I speak a word, Letitia?" she said.

"I don't see how you can," said Mrs. Parke, "for I am late, and you know the Witheringhams are coming. I cannot keep them waiting. But come into my room, if you like, while I dress."

Mary was not coming to dinner on that evening: so that she had no need to dress. She looked pale and

anxious standing in the doorway at the end of the nursery passage in her old grey gown. "But I must speak to you alone—not before your maid," she said.

"Some naughtiness, I suppose," said Letitia with a little sigh of despairing impatience. "Really, you are too particular. But it must wait till to-morrow, my dear —I have only time to slip on my dress."

"But oh, Letitia——"

"For goodness sake don't bother me to death when you know the Witheringhams are coming," Mrs. Parke said. And she went into her room, leaving her friend standing outside. Letitia did not close the door, but left it possible for Mary to follow her, if the communication was so very urgent. But this Miss Hill did not do. She hesitated a moment, wrung her hands, and then disappeared like a ghost within the narrow portals of the nursery passage. Had Letitia only known the words that were on her lips, had Mary been less frightened, less terrified at the sound of her own voice! But it could not have made much difference after all—the shock would have been perhaps less great—but to do away with it altogether was not in any one's power.

Letitia dressed in great haste. She had only time to swallow the cup of tea which she had ordered—to put on her new velvet with the point lace and diamonds —a *rivière*, but nothing much to speak of, which Frogmore had sent her on the birth of the heir—and to pull on one of her gloves, when a sound of carriage wheels in the avenue made her hurry downstairs to be in her place before the Witheringhams arrived. The Witheringhams had never dined at Greenpark before. They were very fine people indeed, the oldest family

in the county, though he was only a baron, so rich that they did not know what to do with their money. They lived a great deal abroad, and it so happened that Letitia had never before been able to offer her hospitality to these distinguished persons who were so little in need of a dinner. For the first time it had "suited" to-night, and to have been a moment late, or to have anything out of order, would have been a sin which Letitia, such a model of social propriety as she was, would not have forgiven herself. Happily, she was not only in the drawing-room herself, but two or three of the *élite* of her guests had come down in good time and stood about like black statues in that irreproachable *tenue* which specially distinguishes Englishmen. It was a moment indescribable when Letitia placed Lady Witheringham in the easiest chair, and sitting down near her, with the warmest cordiality mingled with respect, made the discovery that this great lady's diamonds were really after all not as good as her own. She did not betray the consciousness, but it gave her a secret exhilaration. She felt that she approached her guests upon nearer terms.

"It is a pleasure we have wished for so long, dear Lady Witheringham," she said, "to see you in our own house."

"We are a great deal away," said the old lady. "Witheringham can't stand the winter in England—and to tell the truth when we are at home we are not fond of new people, neither he nor I."

"I hope," said Letitia, "that we can scarcely be considered new people now. After nearly seven years—"

She saw her mistake immediately, but Lady Withering-

ham only smiled. "My husband," she said, with a slight emphasis, "knew the first Lord Frogmore. He got his title for something or other—services to the government." Here the old lady laughed, as if there could be nothing more ridiculous than acquiring a peerage in this way. "But I have heard," she said, after a pause, "that your own family was quite respectable."

Letitia was not proud of her family, and liked to bring it forward as little as possible, but a natural sentiment still existed in her bosom, which was touched by this remark. "Oh, indeed, I hope so," she cried, with a slight movement of irritation, which she was not able to conceal.

"I mean, of course, in point of antiquity," said Lady Witheringham, "in other respects we're all in the hands of Providence. Nothing, you know, can secure morals, or those sort of things—and less in an old family than in others, I sometimes think—Dear me," she added, raising a double eyeglass, and looking at the other end of the room with curiosity, "what have we here?"

Letitia looked up, following Lady Witheringham's glance. I may truly say that if Mrs. Parke were to live for a hundred years she would never forget the spectacle that now presented itself to her eyes. The drawing-room at Greenpark was a long room, opening from an ante-room with large folding doors. In the middle of this ample opening stood a figure in a velvet coat the worse for wear, with a huge beard, long hair and a general air of savagery. He was a little scared apparently by the sight of so many people, and by the looks directed towards him, and stood with a certain

hesitation, looking with a half-bold, half-alarmed air at the circle of ladies near the fire. Letitia sprang to her feet, and caught John by the arm. "Go and see who it is? go and send him away," she said; but even as she spoke her voice went out in a kind of hollow whisper. Oh, heaven and earth! that this should happen to-night.

Everybody was looking towards the same point, and John much surprised, but not daunted, was walking towards this strange intruder, when he seemed to catch sight of Letitia standing thunderstruck by her own hearth. If she had kept her seat and thus kept partially out of sight, things might not have turned out so badly; but everything went against her to-night. The stranger saw her and came forward with a lurch and a shout. "Hallo, Tisch!" he cried. His voice was like a clap of thunder, and shook the pictures on the walls. His big step made the whole house thrill and creak. He caught her in his arms in the middle of all the astonished ladies and gentlemen, and gave her a resounding smack that might have been heard half a mile off. "How are you?" he said, "my lass. I'm as glad to see ye as if ye were the winner in a tip-top race. I began to think I'd been wrong directed and this wasn't my sister's house after all."

The thoughts that passed through Letitia's mind in the moment of that embrace were too many and too swift to be put on paper. She tore herself out of the huge arms which held her up like an infant, jumping on the floor in a momentary paroxysm of passion, in which if she could she would have killed the inopportune visitor. But even while she did so a whole dis-

cussion, argument and counter argument flashed through her mind. She would have liked to have killed him: but he was here, and the butler was at the door announcing that dinner was served, and Lady Witheringham was certainly surveying this big brute, this horrible savage as Letitia called him in her heart—through those double eyeglasses. It was necessary that the mistress of the house should quench every sentiment and keep up appearances. She said, "Ralph!" with a little shriek in which some of her excitement got out. "Gracious goodness!" said Letitia, "I thought you were in Africa. How could you give me such a start without a word of warning. John, it's Ralph——" She paused a moment, and the desperate emergency put words into her mouth. "He has been after—big game—till he looks like a lion out of the woods himself," she cried, with another little shriek—this time of laughter. There was a wildness in it which half betrayed her, but she recovered herself with a little stamp of her foot. "John," she said, "dinner is waiting—don't let us keep everything back for this little family scene." She seized her brother by the hand while her guests filed off decorously, almost wounding him with the sharp pressure of her finger nails. "Don't come to dinner," she whispered; "Mary Hill's in the house."

Ralph gave another great laugh. "As if I didn't know that," he said; "but I'm coming to dinner. I want to see you in all your grandeur, Tisch."

She had to take old Lord Witheringham's arm while the brute was talking, and to smile into the old gentleman's face and to sweep past the stranger, leaving him to follow or *not as he pleased.* Her heart was beating

wildly with fury and dismay. "Don't you think, Lord Witheringham, it is a bad thing when young men go off into the desert—after big game—and grow into savages?" she said. She laughed to blow off some of the excitement, but there was a glare which nobody could have believed possible in her dull eyes.

"That depends very much," said Lord Witheringham, oracularly. He would not commit himself. "Sometimes it is the best thing a young man can do—sometimes it is not so fortunate." Letitia, who expected every moment to have a denial thundering over her shoulder about this big game, and who knew very well that her brother Ralph had not gone away for hunting, as the men did among whom she passed her life, but for very different reasons and to very different regions, was very glad to hurry along at the end of the procession listening to what went on behind, hoping against hope that Ralph might do what she suggested; that he might go in search of Mary, and not appear at all among people who so plainly did not want him. She thought for some time with a great relief that this was what had happened. But when she had taken her place in the dining-room between Lord Witheringham on one side and young Lord George Hitherways on the other, that place to which she had looked forward to with so much pride and pleasure, she saw by the little commotion among the detached men who came in last, the men who had no ladies to take care of, that there was no such relief for her. Ralph was in the midst of them conspicuous in his velvet coat. He pushed them about a little so as to get nearer to his sister. "I beg your *pardon if I'm taking* your place, but I have not seen

my sister for ten years," she heard him saying in his big voice; and when all the guests were settled as near as possible in their right places, lo, there he was planted next to Mrs. Kington, within three of herself. Letitia grew pale when she saw that her brother was so near —then thanked her stars that at least, since it must be, he was within reach where she herself could do what was possible to subdue him. Oh that Mary had but been there! Oh, that Mary had but said that word of warning which she had been so anxious to give. Why did not the fool speak? What did it matter whether the maid was present or not? Three words only were needed—"Ralph is here," and then she would have known what to do.

Letitia had looked forward to that dinner as her greatest triumph. She meant to have been so brilliant and entertaining that Lord Witheringham, who liked to have amusing young women to talk to him, might have been filled with admiration: but how can you be witty and brilliant when you are straining your ears to hear what somebody else is saying? The conversation flagged in spite of all she could do. Lord Witheringham devoted himself to his dinner with a look of supreme gravity. She herself sat, violently loathing her food, but swallowing it in sheer desperation, feeling every idea that had been in her head desert her. In fact poor Letitia was never brilliant in conversation, but this she did not know.

Meanwhile Mrs. Kington was amusing herself very much, and young Lord George did nothing but laugh and listen to the backwoodsman. "Tell me about the big game," the lady had said in a little mellifluous voice.

'I shoot myself, and my husband has made the most famous bags. He was in Africa too. Pray tell me about the big game. Did you go in for lions or elephants or what was it? It is so interesting to meet with a man fresh from the desert."

"You are very kind to say so, my lady," said Ralph, "but it's all nonsense about big game. That's only Tisch's fun. She knows very well I had something quite different in my mind. I've had a shot at a kangaroo or a dog, and I'm sorry to say I've hit a black fellow more that once by mistake. Perhaps that's what she calls big game. Well, it is if you come to that, and deuced serious game, too. You may shoot as many tigers as you like, and get a reward for it, as I've heard; but if you shoot a black fellow, he's no use even for his skin; and if it's known, you get the Government upon your shoulders just the same as if he was a Christian."

"That is hard," said Mrs. Kington, in her pretty voice. "I suppose you mean negroes, Mr. ——" She stopped and looked at Letitia with that delightful impertinence of the higher orders which is one of the finest flowers of civilization. "Do you know," she whispered to Lord George, yet not so low but that Letitia could hear, "John Parke married so much out of our set that I don't know what was her name."

"My name is Ravelstone, and I don't care who knows it," said Ralph. "We are not very particular about names in the bush. Sometimes you may live for years with a fellow at the same station and never know more than some nick-name that's been given him. They *used to call me*——"

"Your name is as old as any in Yorkshire, Ralph," said Letitia, arresting the revelation. "Dear Lady Witheringham was just saying so. Do you know what she said? That you knew the *first* Lord Frogmore, Lord Witheringham. We won't let John hear, but I know what she meant. She meant that the Parkes were nobody to speak of; but I am happy to say Lady Witheringham was quite acquainted with my family. We have never had a title. What is the good of a mushroom title, that dates only from this century?"

"I entirely agree with you, Mrs. Parke," Lord Witheringham said.

"What is the use," cried Letitia, "of putting on a gloss of nobility when you have the substance before; and what is the use of plastering over a name that means nothing with titles? For my part I think there's nothing like real antiquity—a family that has lived in the same place and owned the same ground from the beginning of time."

"Mrs. Parke, I admire every word you say. Such just feeling is very uncommon," Lord Witheringham said.

"Lord, Tisch, how you do run on! How father would have stared if he had heard you. A title for us! —oh, by Jove?" cried Ralph. His roar shook the table. Oh, if some one would kill him—poison him—put him out of Letitia's sight!

CHAPTER VI.

THE room swam in Letitia's eyes; a mist seemed to rise over the sparkling dining-table—over all the faces of the guests. The voices, too, rang in a kind of hubbub, one confused, big noise through which she seemed able to be sure of nothing except the words of Ralph and the laughter, in which all round were so ridiculously, so horribly ready to join. What revelations he might make! How certainly he would prove to the others that he was no elegant prodigal from the fashionable deserts where so many great persons went after big game, but a mere Australian stockman sent there because nobody knew what to do with him at home! She was vaguely aware of talking a great deal herself to stop his talking, if possible, with the dreadful result of merely increasing his outpourings, and of having to subside at last in sheer prostration of faculty, into an alarmed and horrified silence. Ralph, it was evident, amused her guests though he did not amuse Letitia. And that dreadful Mrs. Kington, how she devoted herself to him; how she played upon him and drew him out! When the moment came for the ladies' withdrawal, Letitia rose with mingled relief and terror. She said to herself that no man could be so dangerous by Ralph's side as that clever, spiteful woman; and yet at the same time the dreadful consciousness that among men when

they were alone revelations still more appalling might be made, and that John knew nothing of this prodigal brother, gave her a new cause of alarm. Even in such dreadful circumstances, however, a woman has to endure and say nothing. She gave Ralph a glance as she passed which might have annihilated him, but which conveyed no idea to the obtuse mind of the bushman: while he elevated his eyebrows at her, and made a noise with his tongue against his palate. "You are in all your glory, Tisch!" he said, as she passed. But furious and terrified as she was, she had to go like a martyr to the stake and leave him—to do further harm—who could tell? Mary Hill was in the drawing-room when the ladies filed in, wearing a dyed dress which Letitia had given her, with nervous hands clasped tightly together, and anxiety and panic in her eyes. Mrs. Parke gave her an angry grip as she passed, and said in a fierce whisper, "How could you let him come?" to which Mary answered with a confused murmur of anxious explanation. And then the ordeal began once more.

"How amusing your brother is, Mrs. Parke. I don't know when I have laughed so much. It is so delightful to meet a man like that out of the wilds—and so genuine—and so funny!"

"You had all the fun at your end of the table," said another lady. "We heard you all in shrieks of laughter, and wanted to know what it was about."

"It was about everything," said Mrs. Kington, laughing at the recollection. "He is so delightfully wild, and such a democrat, and so unconventional."

"Too much so, a great deal, for the comfort of his family," said Letitia, with a gasp. She was clever

enough to seize upon the chance thus afforded her. "It is not so amusing when the person belongs to you, and when you know how he has thrown away all his chances," she said, panting.

"Ah!" said Lady Witheringham, with sympathy, "young men are so silly; but none of us can throw a stone in that respect."

This, though Letitia did not know it, was as good as a bombshell to Mrs. Kington, who knew a great deal about prodigals.

"To be silly is one thing and to be amusing is another," said that lady, "every man is not such fun who sows wild oats abroad. You must make him tell you about the black fellows. I nearly died of laughing. There is one story I must tell you——"

"For my part I would rather not die of laughing," said the great lady. She took Letitia by the arm and drew her in the direction of the conservatory. "Let me see your flowers," she said, "and never mind what they say. I know what it is," she added, shaking her head, "to have a boy in the family that you can make nothing of. I sympathize with your parents, Mrs. Parke."

The emergency lent a cleverness which she did not possess to Letitia. She said with a half sob, "He had no mother." This was not a loss which she had ever been specially moved by before; but necessity develops the faculties. Lady Witheringham clasped her arm still more closely. "Ah, poor boy!" she said; "tell me if it does not pain you, dear Mrs. Parke."

Dear Mrs. Parke! the words inspired Letitia. Was it possible, she asked herself piously, that good was to *come out of evil?* and she did tell Ralph's history, with

many details unknown to that gentleman himself, to her sympathetic listener. They walked about softly in front of the subdued lights in the conservatory, the old great lady leaning tenderly upon the arm of John Parke's wife, while the other guests were discussing the brother and sister. "He's not a gentleman at all, and I daresay she was a milliner," Mrs. Kington said, feeling it very piquant to communicate these conjectures all but within hearing of the person most concerned. And Letitia divined but now did not care, for had she not got Lady Witheringham on her side?

Mary Hill sat alone, not noticed by anyone. She occupied the place which a governess of retiring manners does in such a party. All governesses are not persons of retiring manners, and consequently the rule does not always hold. And Miss Hill was not the governess. She was not a salaried dependent, but a friend who in reality conferred instead of receiving benefits: but it was as a dependent that everybody regarded her. She sat very quiet with a sense of guilt towards Letitia, which was entirely gratuitous, and a confusing feeling that she was somehow to blame. That she would be blamed she was very well aware, and her powers of vindicating and asserting herself were small. Beyond this there was great trouble and confusion in Mary's mind. The sight of this big, flushed, disorderly, half-savage man had been a revelation to her even more distressing than his sudden appearance had been to her friend. Letitia's pride was assailed, but in Mary the wound went deeper. When Ralph had been sent to Australia ten years before, he was young, and his offences, though terrible to a girl's sensitive innocence and ignorance,

had been things to weep and pray over rather than to denounce. Poor Ralph! he had been her sweetheart when they were children, he had supposed himself in love with her years ago, and Mary had carried all these years a softened image of him in her heart. She had sighed to herself over it in many a lonely hour. Poor Ralph! if her expectations of his return had never been clear, it was still always a possibility pleasant to think of. And now he had come, and her faintly visioned idol had fallen prone to the ground, like Dagon in his temple. He had never attained the importance of a demi-god, to whom sacred litanies might be said. But there had been a vague niche for him in the background of the temple. And in a moment he had fallen, with the first sound of his rough voice and sight of his deteriorated countenance. Mary was still under the influence of this shock, and it was complicated by the conviction that she was to blame, that Letitia would think she was to blame, that she would be accused and would not know how to defend herself. She sat alone, trembling over the evening paper which she was pretending to read. She heard the *chuchotement* of the soft yet venomous voices near, which were tearing Letitia's pretensions to pieces, and assuring each other that they had always known her to be a nobody—and the other less audible strain of Letitia's narrative to Lady Witheringham. What romance was she telling about poor Ralph to interest the old lady so—poor Ralph, who never had any story but vulgar dissipation and the sharp remedy of being turned out of his father's house to do as he pleased!

The gentlemen as they came in made the usual

diversion, arrested the talk of the ladies, and made an alteration in the groups. But Ralph kept his place among the younger men, standing in a group of them telling his bush stories, keeping up noisy peals of laughter. Somehow the carriages of Lady Witheringham and of Mrs. Kington lingered long that night—or rather, which was a sign that the evening had not been a failure so far as they were concerned, these ladies lingered and showed no inclination to go away. When the great lady got up at last she bestowed a kiss upon her palpitating hostess. "I am so much touched by your confidence in me, my dear," she said, and actually held out her hand to Ralph with a condescending good-night. "I hope you will find your native country the best now that you have returned to it, Mr. Ravelstone," she said. Ralph was so dumbfounded that fortunately he could only reply by a bow. But Letitia's troubles were not over even when her outdoor guests were gone. There were still the visitors in the house, and the familiarity of the smoking-room, in which she was sure her brother would fully unveil himself. She made an attempt to draw him with her when the moment came for the candlesticks. "Come with me to my boudoir, Ralph," she said in her kindest note. But the monster was not to be cajoled. "Oh, I think I see myself in a bou-duar as you call it when there's a lot of jolly fellows waiting me." Letitia caught him by the hand sharply, though without putting her nails into it as she would have liked to do—"Mary's coming with me," she said with the most winning notes she could bring forth. Ralph roared over her head, opening a wide cavern of a mouth in the middle of his big beard. "Mary—'s an old maid,"

he said. As for John Parke, he had a troubled air, and cast curious glances of mingled reproach and interrogation at his wife; but he could not leave his guests in the lurch.

By the time she had escaped from the surveillance of her guests and had got half way up the stair, Letitia had come to have one clear purpose in her mind if no more—and that was vengeance. She said to herself that all the miseries of the evening were Mary's fault; its alleviations, Lady Witheringham's kindness, and her kiss of sympathy Mrs. Parke felt she had achieved for herself—but for Ralph's appearance, unannounced, and indeed for his presence at all, it was Mary that was to blame. She paused on the stairs where the passage led off to the nursery apartments where Miss Hill, when her room was appropriated as now, found a refuge, and turning sharp round gripped Mary's hand, who was so fluttered and frightened that she made a step backward and nearly lost her balance. Letitia held her up with that grip furious and tight upon her arm—"You come with me," she said fiercely, "I've got something to say to you——"

"I'd rather—hear it to-morrow," said poor Mary.

"No, to-night," said Letitia between her pale lips. She led her way to the boudoir, which indeed was a room sacred not to sulkiness but to many a conflict. It was where she received her housekeeper, her nurse, her husband when he was in the way, the homely dressmaker who helped Mrs. Parke's maid with her simple dresses, and Miss Hill; these were the privileged persons who knew and had to listen to the eloquent discourses of Letitia—and they had all a sacred horror of

the boudoir. She swept into it this evening with Mary following and flung herself into a chair. Her eyes, not generally bright, had little flames in them. She was pale, and panted for breath. After all her long repression it was an unspeakable relief to get to this sanctuary to give vent to herself, to heap wrath upon everybody who was to blame—

"Well, Mary Hill!" she cried with a snort of passion, turning upon her friend. The diamonds on her neck gave forth little quick gleams moving with the panting of her wrath, as if they simulated the passion which burned in their mistress' eyes.

"Well, Letitia," said the mild Mary, "I see you are very angry——"

"Have I not reason to be angry? Why on earth didn't you let me know? What motive could you have to keep it a secret? Why, for goodness sake didn't you tell me? I never will fathom you, Mary Hill! And to think that you should have brought this upon me without a word, without making a sign——"

"I implored you to let me speak to you, Letitia. I waited on the stairs for you."

"Implored me! waited for me! why, you should have forced me to hear. Do you think if it had been as important as that I should have been content to wait on the stairs? I'd have let any one know that minded as much as you knew I'd mind. If they'd killed me I'd have let them know: and to think I've tried to be so kind to you—oh, Mary Hill. To think you should have stood by and seen it all and never lifted a hand!"

"What could I do?" said poor Mary, "I wasn't even there——"

"And why weren't you there? There are no risks in such a case as that; you should have dressed and come to dinner and made him take you in and kept him quiet. That's what you would have done if you had been a true friend."

"I couldn't have taken—such a liberty; when you had settled it all."

"What did it matter about my settling it all. Did I know what was going to happen? And to take the advantage just then of coming when I was out of the way! But I tell you what, Mary Hill. I blame you for more than that. You never should have let him come in at all—you never would had you been a true friend."

"Oh, Letitia, what could I do? Your own brother."

"My own brother! such a pleasant visitor, don't you think?—such a credit to us all—without even an evening coat! like a clown, like a blackguard, like a navvy ——Oh, my patience!" cried Letitia, whose eyes were starting from her head and who had no patience at all. "But I know why you did it," she added after an angry pause to get breath. "Oh, I remember well enough. It's not for nothing you're an old maid, Mary Hill! Don't I know that you've had him in your mind all the while?"

Mary, though she was so mild, was being driven beyond the power of self-restraint. She was all the more easily shaken perhaps that there was a certain truth in it. It was true that Ralph Ravelstone had never been forgotten—and that his shadow had come between her

and the only marriage she had ever had it in her power to make—but not, oh, not as he appeared now.

"I think," she said with some gentle dignity, "that it is very improper of you to say anything of the kind. If I am an old maid it's at least by my own will, and not because I could not help it." Mary was very mild, and yet she felt that, standing upon the platform of that proposal which was so very distinct an incident in her life, it was hard to be assailed as an old maid by one who knew her so well.

Letitia stood for a moment surprised—scarcely believing her ears. That Mary should have turned upon her! It was like the proverbial worm that sometimes at unexpected moments will turn when nobody is thinking of it. "I know as well as you do that you refused a good offer. What was it made you do it? Oh, I can see through you, though you don't think so! I always suspected it, and now I know it. But what did you expect to gain by bringing him here? Why should he be brought here? If you had ever told me, if I had known! a man who has been ten years in the bush, a man with a hand like that, and not an evening coat! Oh Mary, you that I have always been so kind to, how could I ever have expected such a thing of you?"

Tears of rage came to the relief of Letitia's overburdened soul. But she suddenly regained command of herself in a moment, dried her eyes and turned to the door. It was now her own part to stand on the defensive, to give explanations and excuses. There was no mistaking the step which was approaching, the heavy step of the outraged husband, he who had never even

heard of Ralph's existence. John Parke was not a man before whom his wife was accustomed to tremble. But she did not know what John might be about to pour forth upon her now.

CHAPTER VII.

JOHN came into the room with gloom upon his countenance, and a frown upon his noble brow. Letitia had arrested the course of her own passion—she had dried her eyes, and dropped her voice, and prepared herself to meet him with a real apprehension. It was not often that she was afraid of John, but for once there was no doubt that if John was in the mind to find fault he had a sufficient reason. The sight of her husband's troubled face checked her anger and dried up the tears of vexation that had been in her eyes. She gave Mary an appealing look, and made her a motion to sit down by her. It went through her mind quickly that Mary might make a little stand for Ralph when she could not do it herself, and thus break the edge of the assault. If John could be made to see that Ralph was Mary's old sweetheart, that it was Mary's indiscretion which had brought him there, it would be easier in every way to manage the dilemma. John came in with his heavy step and his countenance overcast, but he looked like a man perplexed rather than angry, and as he came forward it was apparent that he held a telegram in his hand.

"Look here," he said, "Letitia, here is a bore: just when we have got the house full to the door: look at that—that he should choose this time of all others for the visit that has been spoken of so long!"

"John," said Letitia, with a gasp, "I never meant him to come here."

"You never meant Frogmore to come here?"

"Frogmore!" she said, with a sort of wondering obtuseness. She was never stupid, and it made John angry, because he was quite unaccustomed to be misunderstood.

"You had better look at the telegram," he said impatiently. "I don't pretend to know what you mean. Here is the house crammed with men, and my brother, for the first time since we have been married, proposes a visit. What are we to do?"

It took Letitia some time to understand; her mind was so preoccupied by the other subject that she could not distract her thoughts from it. Frogmore—Frogmore or Ralph—which was it? She tried to shake herself together and grasp the sense of the words at which she was gazing:

"Could come to you to-morrow for three or four days, if it suits you. "FROGMORE."

"Was there ever such a bore?" John continued saying. "The first time he has proposed to come. And we've got the house crammed, and not a corner to put him in. What am I to do?"

"Frogmore!" Letitia murmured again to herself; and John went on saying, with a monotony which is natural to many men, the same burden of regret, "The house full of men and not a corner to put him in," as if, in some way, the repeated statement of that fact might make a change.

"I don't know what you are thinking of," said Le-

titia at length with much relief feeling that her own brother would be forgotten in the importance of his. "Of course, Frogmore must come, and there is an end of it. I hope you answered his telegram at once."

"How could I answer the telegram—when the house is crowded with men and we have not a——"

"Yes, yes," she said, "we know all that. Of course, he must come. If I should have to give him my own room; of course, he must come. There are so many things I want done. It would be tempting Providence to refuse Frogmore. I want a new nursery, and a cottage for the gardener, and I don't know how many things. You had better write a telegram, and give it to Saunders to be sent the first thing in the morning."

"But, Letitia, when you know the house is crowded, and there is not a——"

"Oh, don't bother me," said Letitia, "as if I had not enough without that! It is not a corner that will do for Frogmore. He must have, of course, the best room in the house. For goodness sake, John, go back to your men in the smoking-room, and tell them you have a very bad account of the covers, and that there are no birds to speak of. Say you're dreadfully sorry, and that you find you've asked them on false pretences."

"But——" said John. "Why Letitia! I have heard nothing of the kind."

"I have, then," she said. "They didn't like to tell you—scarcely a bird. Those sort of accidents will happen. Go and tell them. Say you don't know what to make of it."

"I don't, indeed," said John; "I can't understand it. Martin never said a word to me on the subject. That's

bad news, indeed. The men will think—I don't know what they will think." He turned to go away, looking more gloomy than ever; but when he got to the door of the boudoir turned round for a moment. "That brother of yours," he said, "is a very queer fish."

"Ralph! Oh, goodness gracious, do you think it's necessary to tell me that?"

"He's a very queer fish," said John, with a laugh. "Those fellows are drawing him out. He is telling them all kinds of bush stories. I don't believe half of them are true. Why did you never tell me you had a brother in the bush?"

"I thought he was dead," she said. "I wish he had been dead bofore he came here. If I had only been at home it never would have happened. What's the good of you, a man, if you can't turn a fellow like that out of the house?"

John turned round upon her with amazement. "My wife's brother!" he said.

"I don't want to think of him as my brother. For goodness sake if you want me to have any peace turn him out of the house."

"Letitia," said John, "in most things you have your own way, and if you like to do a nasty thing yourself I never interfere; but as for turning your brother out of my house——"

"I'm ready to give up even my own comfort to your brother," she said.

John stood for a moment feeling that there was something strained in the parallel—but not quite clever enough to perceive what it was. "Oh as for that!" he said vaguely. Then he gave it up, the puzzle being too

much for him. "And so would I," he said, "do a great deal to please you, Letitia—but I can't turn a man out of my house. If you have nothing more to say than that, I'll go and tell those fellows about the birds."

Letitia sat clenching her hands to keep in her wrath until he had closed the door, and his heavy foot sounded remote and far off as he went down the stairs. She then turned to Mary, who had made several attempts to go away, but had been retained by a gesture more and more imperative at every move she made. "Mary, I hope you know how much you owe me," she said.

"You have been very—kind, Letitia—" said Mary faltering.

"You've been no expense to your father and mother for a whole year, not even for dress—you know there's not many friends would do that."

Mary hung her head and made no reply. She had not the courage to say that she had done something in return—scarcely even to think so, being very humble-minded—and yet— It was not generous to remind her so often of what was done for her, and the gratitude thus called for would not form itself into words.

"Well, now, you must do something for me. You must get Ralph out of this house."

"I!" said Mary, in dismay.

"Yes, you. He came for you. Don't deny it, for I am sure of it. What else would have brought him here? He and I were never friends. He knew I wouldn't have him at any price, but he thought that through you, as you were always his sweetheart——"

"I never was anything to Ralph—never! He went

away without so much as saying good-bye," Mary said, with indignation.

"That proves exactly what I say. If he had been nothing to you you would not have remembered that he went away without saying good-bye—you needn't try to deceive me, Mary. Now, you must get him out of this house."

"Oh, Tisch!" said Mary, in forgetfulness of all injunctions. Their youth together and all its incidents came rushing back upon her mind. "Oh," she said, "if you will remember, mother was kind to you then. Oh, don't you recollect how often you were all at the vicarage then? Oh, Letitia, I beg your pardon, I didn't mean to say that: but don't—don't be hard upon me now!"

Letitia rose up with her eyes and her diamonds sending forth kindred gleams. "Do you dare to compare your mother's kindness with mine," she said. "What was it?—a bit of cake to a child—and I've taken all your expenses off them for a whole year. Where did you get that dress you are wearing, Mary Hill? Who is it that keeps a roof over your head and a fire in your room, and everything as comfortable as if you were a duke's daughter? Your mother kind to me? I wonder you dare to look me in the face."

But, indeed, poor Mary did not look her in the face. She had put down her head in her hands, beaten by this storm. Though it was but the most timid reprisals, Mary felt that it was ungenerous to speak of her mother's kindness—and, after all, was not Letitia right? for there never had been much in the vicarage to give. And it was true about the dress—it was that dyed silk which

Mrs. Parke had given her, a silk richer than anything poor Mary could have bought for herself. It was true, also, about the fire in the bedroom, which was a luxury impossible in the vicarage. It might not be generous to remind her of these things, but still they were true.

Letitia drew an angry breath of relief. She sat down again with the satisfaction of one who has achieved a logical triumph and silenced an adversary. "Look here," she said. "I don't think anything can be done to-night. We must just leave it. He's done as much harm as he can. But if Lord Frogmore were to come to-morrow and find Ralph I should die. That is all about it. I should just die, rather than let that horrid old man see my brother in a velveteen coat, like a game-keeper, and with the manners of a groom. I'd——take chloral, or something. Now you know! I can't bear it, and I won't bear it. The Parkes were never very nice to me. And that old man as good as said—No, I will not bear it, Mary Hill. If he comes before Ralph is gone I shall be found dead in my bed, and you will be answerable: for without you he never could have got admission here."

"Oh, Letitia! don't say such dreadful things," cried Mary, raising a horror-stricken face.

"No, I shall not say them, but I shall do them," said Mrs. Parke. She was like one who has given a final decision, as she gathered up in her hands the train of her heavy velvet dress. "Good-night," she said; "I may never say it again."

"Letitia!" Mary's horror and trouble could find no words.

"I can't think—that you'd kiss me like Judas—and

mean to kill me all the same," said the possible martyr, withdrawing within the curtains which screened the door of her bedchamber. She heard the still more horror-stricken tone of Mary's protest. "Oh, Letitia!" as she disappeared. Mrs. Parke was not afraid of a bold simile. She dropped her excitement as she dropped her velvet skirt, as soon as the door had closed upon her, and submitted herself to the hands of her maid with much calm. She had not the least doubt that Mary would lie awake all night, trembling over that threat, and that in the morning, by some means or other, her commands would be done.

Mary fulfilled these prognostications to the letter. She never closed her eyes all night, but pictured to herself all the horrors of suicide, the dreadful discovery, the guilt of which she would never feel herself free all her life. She said to herself, indeed, a hundred times that people who threaten such dreadful acts never perform them, but then reflected that many people had taken comfort from such a thought and then found themselves confronted by a horrible fact contradicting everything. It might be folly for a hundred times, yet if once it should come true! Mary, who had never seen old Lord Frogmore, figured to herself a sneering dreadful old man, whose satirical looks would be enough to make life intolerable. She had read of such men in books, and specially of the relations of the husband who would pursue with rancour or contempt a wife whom they did not approve. She went over it so often in her waking dreams that she seemed to see the dreadful old cynic whose very glance would be like a sharp arrow. Poor Letitia! It was bad enough to have a brother like

Ralph without exhibiting him at his very worst to the old lord. Though the sight of the man, who had once been her hero, in his fallen state was dreadful to poor Mary, it became more and more plain to her that she must see him; that she must even ask him to see her, and execute Letitia's will and clear this obstacle out of her friend's path even if she herself were to die of it, as Letitia threatened she would. Mary's heart jumped up in her throat and beat like a fluttering bird as if it would escape altogether from her bosom at the thought. How was she to speak to him, to argue with him, to persuade him? What words could she find to bid him leave his sister's house and never show himself there again? Poor Ralph! Her tender heart pitied him too —he was a terrible apparition, shaming the past, a scare and horror in the present, but what could be so dreadful for a man coming back after so many years as to be disowned and turned away by his nearest relations —to be forbidden his sister's house? Mary thought, but with a thrill of horror, what she would have done had he been her own brother, or if Will or Harry should come back like that. What misery would be so dreadful, what misfortune so terrible! But Mary knew well that she would never turn her back upon "the boys" whatever happened. The worse things were, they would have the more need of her. She would stand up for them, cover their faults, invent virtues for them if they had not any, make everybody but herself believe that they were guiltless. Oh! nobody should say a word against those who were dear to her—no one! Not husband nor husband's kin—no one, not even if it was the Queen herself. Mary said this to herself with a burst of generous

indignation—and then her heart sank down, down into the depths, thinking of Letitia's threat, of Letitia perhaps possibly—if it were only possible that was bad enough—doing what she said! And the horror in the morning; the little children weeping, John Parke confounded, not knowing what to think, looking dully at the bed.

Mary got up in the horror of this thought in the dusk of the October morning, before daylight. She heard with a tremor that Mrs. Parke was not very well, was not coming downstairs, but was consoled by the sight of the plentiful breakfast which was being carried up to Letitia. Her maid would not have carried up a breakfast like that if there had been anything really wrong; and besides nothing could have gone wrong so far, for there had been no time as yet for sending Ralph away. The dreadful thing was that he did not appear to breakfast any more than his sister. Mary, as she sat behind the tea urn, heard the gentlemen laughing over the previous night. They were sure the bushman would not come up to the scratch this morning they said. If he appeared in time for lunch that would be all that could be looked for. Mary, listening with an anxiety which she could scarcely conceal, soon discovered that one at least of the guests was going away, called as he said by sudden business. If Ralph did not come down till luncheon what should she do? Lord Frogmore might come early, he might meet the prodigal brother—and then! Mary trembled from head to foot. She said to herself that it was folly, that nothing would happen, that Letitia was not that kind—and then she said to herself who could tell, who knows what might happen? By dint

of thinking one thing and another her brain was in a whirl. What was she to do?

Sometimes it happens that by dint of mere terror a coward will do a more daring thing than the bravest person would undertake in command of his faculties. Mary ended by sending to Ralph, while he was still sleeping off the whisky of the smoking-room, a note with these words——

"Dear Ralph,—I must speak to you. Come to me for God's sake in the garden by the sundial at twelve o'clock. It may be a matter of life and death."

She sent this up after breakfast, and for a little while Mary was more calm. At least she would do what she could for Letitia. For herself and for what he might think of her, or how he might take her summons, she thought nothing at all.

CHAPTER VIII.

It was a dull morning, one of those grey days which sometimes come in autumn, when all the winds are still, when the changed and ruddy foliage hangs like a sort of illumination against the colourless atmosphere, and the air is soft and warm, though without sunshine. There had been a great deal of stir in the house in the morning. Two of the visitors had gone hastily away, summoned by urgent business which coincided strangely with the despairing account of the covers which John, prompted by Letitia, had carried to the smoking-room on the previous night. These gentlemen had been driven from the door, one in the dogcart, one in Letitia's own brougham, and the going away had caused a little bustle and commotion. The others had gone out late to the discredited covers, not expecting much sport. But by noon all was quiet about the house, where, as yet, Mrs. Parke was not visible, nor yet the unwelcome visitor who occupied Mary's room, making her wonder, with a sense of disgust, whether she ever could go into it again. She went to the sundial with great perturbation and excitement, just as the stable clock was preparing, with a loud note of warning, which made a great sound in the still air, to strike twelve. The sundial was at some little distance from the house, in a little dell on the outer edge of the gardens, surrounded

by blooming shrubs on one side and on the other by some of the large trees of the little park—a very small one, but made the most of—which surrounded the house. It was fully open to the gray still light in which there were no shadows, and a little damp with the autumnal mists. Mary wondered at herself for having given this rendezvous when she came to think of it. She might just as well have asked Ralph to meet her in the drawing-room or the library, where at this time of the day there was nobody. There were, indeed, two lady visitors in the house, but the morning-room was their usual haunt; and she now reflected that she was much more likely to be seen by them in this opening, which was swept from end to end by the full daylight, than in any room in the house. She asked herself whether it was some romantic association—some thought of what people did in novels—which had made her suggest a meeting out of doors. How ridiculous it was! How much more likely to be remarked! But it was too late to think of this. She wandered through the garden, gathering a few late blossoms from the geraniums, which were just about to be taken up for the winter, and a handful of the straggling long stalks of mignonnette, which had a kind of melancholy sweetness in which there was a touch of frost and decay. Mary could never in all her life after endure the scent of mignonnette.

She saw him after awhile coming, directed by the footman, whom he had evidently asked the way without any veiling of intention, rather—as she suddenly perceived to be quite natural, and the thing she ought to have expected—with an ostentatious disclosure of

what he wanted. She could almost imagine him saying that he had an appointment with a lady. The shock which had been produced in Mary's mind by the sudden destruction of her youthful ideal in the person of this (as she now thought) dreadful man made her perhaps unjust to Ralph. He came towards the sundial, however, in the full revelation of the grey light with a smile of self-satisfaction on his face which strengthened the supposition. He had a habitual lurch in his walk, and his large, broad figure was made all the broader and more loose and large in the light suit of large checks which he wore. He had a flaming red necktie to accentuate the redness of his broad face. Mary felt with a shudder that there was reason in Letitia's horror. To let this man be seen by a fastidious, aristocratic, cynical old gentleman, natural critic and antagonist of his brother's wife—oh, no!—she understood Letitia now. If Will or Harry should come home like that! But the idea was too horrible to be entertained for a moment. Ralph came up to the sundial—she had hidden herself behind a clump of lilac bushes to watch him—with that smirk upon his face and a swing and swagger of conquest about him. He leant upon it, arranging himself in a triumphant pose to wait. Then he began to whistle, then he called "Hi!" and "Here!" under his breath. After a minute he became impatient and whistled more loudly, and detaching himself from the sundial looked round. "Hi, Mary!" he cried. "Hallo, my lass!" He caught sight at last of her dark dress among the lilacs, and turned round with a loud snap of his fingers. "Oh, there you are!" he cried, "and by Jove right you are, Mary, my girl. It's too open here."

He strolled across the grass towards her with a swing and a lurch of his great person more triumphant than ever. "Right you are," he said, with a laugh. "It's a deal too open. I like your sense, Mary, my dear."

Mary hurried forward, feeling herself crimson with shame, and met him in the middle of the glade. "It can't be too open for what I have to say to you," she said; then added most inconsiderately, "We had surely better go back to the house. We shall be less remarked there."

"I don't think you know what you mean," he said, thrusting his arm through hers, and holding it as though to lean upon her. "That's a woman all over. Gives you a meeting and then's frightened to keep it. I've been a rover, I don't deny it, and I know their ways. You like me all the better now, don't you, for knowing all your little ways?"

He held her arm, drawing her close to him, and bending over her, surrounding the prim and gentle Mary, fastidious old maid as she was, with that atmosphere of stale tobacco and half-exhausted spirits which breathes from some men. He reminded her of the sensations she had experienced in passing the village public-house—but she was not passing it, she was involved in it now, surrounded by its sickening breath. Every kind of humiliation and horror was in that contact to Mary. She tried in vain to draw herself out of his hold.

"Ralph, oh, please let me go. I have got a message for you. That was why I asked you to come here."

He laughed and leaned over her more than ever, disgusting more than words could say this shrinking woman, whom he believed in his heart he was treating as women love best to be treated. "Come, now," he said, "Mary, my love, don't go on pretending: as if I wasn't up to all these dodges. Say honest you wanted a word with your old sweetheart without Tisch spying on you with them sharp eyes of hers. And how she's gone off. She's as ugly as a toad—and stuck up! I daresay she'd think her brother was demeaning himself to the governess—eh? You're the governess, ain't you?" Mr. Ravelstone said.

"I am not the governess; and if either you or she think *I* would demean myself——" Mary's habitual gentleness made her all the more fiery and impassioned now—the fierceness of a dove. She disengaged herself from his hold with the vehemence of her sudden movement. She stood panting beyond his reach and addressed him. "Don't come a step nearer! I have a message to you from Tisch. Can't you see, if you have any sense at all, that she cannot want you here?"

He gave her a strange and angry look. "What do you mean? Tisch—my own sister: you've gone out of your mind, Mary Hill."

"It is you that have gone out of your mind. Look at her house, and the way she lives. Look at her husband, a gentleman. Mr. Parke may be stupid, but he is a gentleman. Didn't you understand last night how she was feeling? What has a man like you to do here? Why, at Grocombe—even at Grocombe they would feel it; and fancy what it must be here."

"What would they feel at Grocombe?" said Ralph,

growing doubly red, and looking at her with a threatening air.

Mary paused. To hurt anyone was impossible to her—she could not do it. She looked at him; at the droop of his features, from which the jaunty air of complacence had gone, and at his debasement and deterioration, which were so evident in her eyes, not to be mistaken; and her courage failed her. "Oh! Ralph," she said, "there is a difference. It's not only money, or the want of money. You know there is a difference. She wants you to go away."

"Who wants me to go away?"

His countenance grew darker and darker. He looked at her as if he would have struck her. It was she—his old playfellow—who was thus humiliating him to the earth.

Mary grew more and more compunctious. "It is her way of looking at things," she said, faltering. "She is not like you, or me. She thinks so much of what people say. You came to dinner," said Mary, suddenly, thinking of something that might break the blow, "in your velveteen coat."

An air of relief came over Ralph's face. He laughed loudly, yet with evident ease. "So that's what it is!" he said. "You're ashamed of my clo'es, you two young women. Well, I must say women are the meanest beggars I ever saw, and I've met all sorts. Ashamed of my clo'es!"

Mary was relieved beyond measure that he should so take it. She drew a long breath. "It's so much thought of in this kind of house," she said; "and they are expecting Lord Frogmore. Oh, Ralph, don't take

it amiss. Letitia is not very strong. She has, perhaps, been spoilt a little, always getting her own way; and she has no room to give her brother-in-law. They get everything from him," she added, hurriedly. "He is so rich: oh! Ralph, how can I say it. I would not for the world hurt your feelings. She wants you to go—while Lord Frogmore is here."

"She has no room to give her brother-in-law, and she prefers my room to my company, eh?" he said, with a harsh laugh. "I'm not good enough to meet that old fogey in my velvet coat. Why, I thought velvet was all the fashion. They said so in the papers, Mary."

"Not in the evening, Ralph," said Mary, with a sense of duplicity which made her turn away her face.

"Not in the evening, eh? I suppose this fellow must have swallow-tails? Well, it's a poor thing to snub your brother for, ain't it, Mary? You wouldn't do that to a brother of yours."

"I don't think I should, Ralph; but then Letitia has married into a—grand family, and she has her husband's people to think of."

"By George!" he cried, "her husband's people! and me her own brother!" Mary could not refrain from one glance of sympathy—which he caught in the momentary raising of her eyes, and which was so kind yet timid that he burst into a sudden laugh.

"Mary," he said, endeavoring again to put his arm through hers—"You've never got a husband, my lass. Tell me how it is: for you were always a great deal prettier than Tisch, with nice little ways."

"Don't, Ralph—I prefer to walk alone, if you please."

"You're afraid to be seen, you little goose!" he

said. "I know your dodges. Come, tell us how it was. If there was one lass in Grocombe that was sure to get a husband I should have said it was you. Come, Mary, tell! I think I know the reason why."

Mary looked at him with a little air which she intended to check impertinence, but which had no effect on Ralph. "I should think it was enough—that I preferred to stay as I am—without any other reason," she said.

"Oh, tell that to———anyone that will believe it," cried Ralph. "I know women a little better than that. I'll tell you what it was, and deny it, Mary, if you can. You were waiting for an old sweetheart to come home. Ah, now, I've made you jump. That's your little secret. As if I didn't know it the moment I set eyes on you, my dear."

"You are quite, quite wrong—whatever you mean —and I don't know what you mean," said Mary, very angry. It was not true: and yet yesterday, before he had shown himself, there was just so much possibility in the supposition that it might have been true.

He laughed in his triumph over her, and sense of manly superiority, the sweetheart for whom she had waited, but who had no immediate intention of rewarding her for her constancy.

"We haven't a chance you know," he said, "my dear, for being as faithful as that: for you see a man has women after him wherever he goes. Oh, I've been a rover, Mary, I'll not deny it. A fellow like me can't help himself. I've never married, and you may think if you like it is because I hadn't forgotten you; but I've had plenty more ready to fling themselves at my head:

so you mustn't be surprised if I can't make up my mind to buy the ring all at once."

"Will you tell me your answer for Letitia?" cried Mary, with a crimson countenance, looking him as steadily as she could in the face.

"An answer for Tisch—bother Tisch! if you want an answer for yourself, my dear——"

"Will you leave Greenpark to-day?" cried Mary, with lamblike fury. "Will you go away directly—this moment? I'll go and tell the footman to put up your things for you, Mr. Ravelstone. Mrs. Parke wishes you to go—directly. Do you hear what I say?"

"Why, then, what a little hussy you are—as bad as Tisch herself. And what have I done? You could not expect me to have the ring in my pocket——"

"It doesn't matter," said Mary, "if she does kill herself or if they all kill themselves. I will not stand to be insulted one moment longer. Stay if you please in a place where they hate you and scorn you, and will not speak a word to you. Oh, stay if you please and shame them! But you can't shame me, for I have nothing to do with you; only I hope I shall never see you or hear your horrid name again."

She turned from him and fled across the grass and along the garden paths with the swiftness of a girl of sixteen and with an energy of scorn which the most complacent of men could not have mistaken. Ralph Ravelstone stood looking after her with a face full of amazement. He did not understand it. A woman of Mary's age is supposed by men of his class to be very open to any overture and not too fastidious as to the terms of it. Besides he had meant to be an amiable

conqueror; not to be disrespectful at all. He turned slowly after her with his countenance a great deal longer than when he had first approached. The reality of this repulse struck him more than anything she could have said. He was in his way an *homme à bonnes fortunes,* not used to be repulsed by the kind of women he had known. Mary was something different, something finer, though she was only an old maid. His self-confidence was not very deep, and in the bottom of his heart perhaps he suspected that he was not the most creditable of suitors or of brothers. He stood pulling his big beard and looking after the hurrying figure which never slackened pace nor looked back till it had disappeared into the house. And then he walked slowly after her, with certain words coming back to his ears. "Stay in a place where they hate you and scorn you!" He remembered how his sister had jumped out of his arms, how she had looked at him with staring eyes. "By Jove!" he said to himself, quickening his pace, and strode into the house and rang the bell in his room (he was not much accustomed to bells) till he pulled it down, filling the house with the furious tinkling, and bringing the footman and a stray housemaid from different corners of the house, stumbling up the unaccustomed stairs—for Mary's room was in a remote corner of the house, and Miss Hill's bell did not ring three times in a year.

CHAPTER IX.

"My mistress, sir, is too poorly to see anyone."

"Do you know who I am?" said Ralph.

He stood swelling out his big chest in front of the polite imperturbable figure in black, which made the bushman's large check still more emphatic.

"Well, sir," said Saunders, with a deprecating smile, "I am sorry to say as I did not catch the name."

"I am her brother, you fool," said Ralph. "Go back and say that it's her brother, and I must see her before I go. What do you stand there for, gaping? Go back and tell her I can't go without seeing her. Don't you hear?"

"I hear very well, sir," said Saunders, "but I make no doubt, sir, my mistress knew who you was, though I didn't quite catch the name."

"Where's Mr. Parke?" said Ralph.

"He has gone out, sir, with the other gentlemen. I understand his lordship is expected this evening," said Mr. Saunders, with the importance such an intimation deserved.

"And who's his lordship?" thundered Ralph.

"His lordship, sir, is master's brother, Viscount Frogmore. He is an old gentleman, and we're the heirs presumptive in this house."

Ralph was considerably struck by this intimation,

which had not affected him when Mary conveyed the news. An old viscount to whom his sister was heir presumptive must be an important person. He was not very learned in, or else he had forgotten the terms and conditions of English rank. He had heard indeed that Tisch had made a great marriage, but not much more about it, and indeed it had sincerely been more a natural desire to see his sister than any hope of allying himself to the exalted personages to whom she belonged which had moved the bushman. He stood stroking down his big beard in all the majesty of his large checks and burly person, but with a look of great perplexity on his countenance. What should he do? As a matter of fact his irruption into the drawing-room on the night before, and the sudden sight of Tisch in all her glory, had startled him greatly. His confusion had turned into noise and bravado, as confusion and a sense of inappropriateness often do. And then he had been excited and his head turned by the attention his odd stories had received and the civility of the gentlemen who drew him out. Altogether there had been a whirl of events, which, in conjunction with the case of bottles in the smoking-room, and other potations which had led the way, had dazed Ralph. But now he came to himself. He realized that he was not wanted, with an acuteness which wounded the poor fellow more than such a rash personage could be supposed to be capable of being wounded. He stood and stared at the butler, while this process was going on in his mind. He was very nearly taking that functionary into his confidence, telling him what a trick Letitia had played him, and what a strange reception this was for a man newly come

home. He ended his musing, however, by a sudden burst of his big laughter in the face of Saunders.

"Don't stand and stare like a stuck pig," he said, "but go and order the dogcart, or whatever you've got —for I'm going off. You didn't suppose I'd stay where I'm not wanted, did you? You're used to sending fellows off when they're not wanted—ain't you, old Tuppeny," he added, giving Saunders a poke in his ribs.

The laughter and the roughness which made Saunders think Missis' brother an affable, if not very fine gentleman, were both the product of the confusion in Ralph's mind, rather than of any desire to expend high spirits in a joke. He took out a sovereign from his pocket and twanged it through the air into the astonished butler's palm, which somehow, surprised though Saunders was, found itself open to receive the unimportant gift. Ralph intended to show his solemn antagonist that a man who could toss about sovereigns like that was not a man who was in want of anything from Mrs. Parke. But it is doubtful how far he succeeded. Saunders had a profound acquaintance with the ways of men about the world, and his judgment was not that it was rich men who throw their sovereigns about. But he did not in the least object to have pieces of gold flung at him, and, indeed, liked the sound of them twanging through the air.

Ralph, however, was in no hurry to go. He watched the footman strapping up his much-used portmanteau, and intimated that he thought he might as well have some lunch before he left: and he went out and displayed himself in front of the house, making a promenade

up and down with his chest thrown well out, and his big footsteps making the gravel fly. He was not aware that Letitia watched him from her window, but he hoped as much, and that it was gall to her to see him in the way of every visitor who might arrive. The first who arrived, indeed, was no visitor, but the representative of the house in the person of Master Marmaduke, a little fellow of five, dressed in one of those childish suits which make a child look as if it had gone to seed in the upper parts of its person, and was supported by the most incomplete thin stalks below. He was not so firmly planted upon his little legs as he ought to have been, but his shoulders had thus the air of being broad and strong. He returned from his walk with his nurse, while Ralph was taking this little stroll in preparation for the luncheon, which was being prepared for him in the dining-room. Little Duke went up to the intruder, whom he had not seen, with the air of the master of the house, seven times doubled in dignity and consequence. "Were you wanting anything here?" he asked, as if he had been his own father; but John Parke never filled the role so well.

"Oh, Master Duke," said the nurse, dismayed, "the gentleman is staying in the house!"

Duke surveyed the bushman from head to foot with a child's disapproval of a type unknown.

"Hold your tongue," he said, "and let me alone. He's not staying in the house! Why, I've never seen him till this moment, and he's not like anybody I know."

"What's your name, little man?" said Ralph. "Come

here and shake hands, and I'll give you a bit of Australian gold, my boy, to know your uncle by."

Duke planted his thin little legs very wide apart and stared. He liked the idea of that bit of gold without any special certainty as to what it was, but he did not approach too close to a man whose appearance did not satisfy his perceptions. "I don't know you," he said, "I don't know you a bit. I never saw any one the least like you. Do you mean that you're my uncle? What are bits of Australian gold like?"

"They are very much like sovereigns," said Ralph.

Duke's legs involuntarily brought him a little nearer. "You are not like the rest of the gentlemen," said Duke. "You are very queerly dressed. I don't think you can be my uncle. But I should like to see the Australian gold."

Australian was a big mouthful for such a small boy. He got over it in syllables and with an effort.

"Look here," said Ralph, repeating the manœuvre which he had tried with Saunders. Only he twanged the sovereign into the air with his thumb and caught it this time in the palm of his own hand. Duke watched the coin with the greatest interest and drew near to look at it, but did not put forth his own little hand.

"It's just money," he said, in a tone of half disappointment, half contempt. Then he added, "Should I have that to spend if—if you gave it me, you know?"

"Oh yes, you should have it to spend. You shall have it when you come and shake hands with your uncle," said Ralph.

The boy came nearer. Then paused again and said, "I'm sure you can't be Lord Frogmore."

"Why not?" said Ralph, with his big laugh.

Duke looked at him critically and seriously, "Because you don't look like a ——, because I don't think you're a ——." What he wanted to say was that his new acquaintance was not a gentleman. Duke thought he was like the keepers. One of the grooms in his Sunday clothes had very much the air of this strange person who caught the sovereign in his hand in that clever way. But little Duke did not like to suggest, looking up into a big man's face, that he was not a gentleman. So he stopped and stared, almost forgetting the Australian gold in this perplexity which was an experience not at all familiar to him.

"Not like a lord?" said Ralph. "How do you know? I don't suppose you know many lords, do you, little man? I might be a duke for aught you know."

The little boy stared again less assured. He had not been used to think of lords as a different species, but he had never known a duke. It was well within the limits of possibility that a duke might be like a gamekeeper. The species was unknown to little Marmaduke Parke.

"Are you a duke?" he asked with much seriousness and eyes very keen and sharp in the study of the new species. Ralph burst into a big laugh.

"No," he said, "my little man, but I'm your uncle. Not Lord Frogmore, but one of the other side. I'm your Uncle Ralph. Come and shake hands."

Duke advanced slowly as it were under protest, and at last ventured to place a little soft hand in the comparatively monstrous palm of Ralph, who squeezed the sovereign into it with such energy that the little boy

cried out, and unaccustomed to such gratuities let the coin drop upon the path. But Duke picked it up with a practical sense which did him credit, and turned it over with eyes in which awe and eagerness were combined. He recognized the Queen's head—but there was something about it which struck him as unusual. Unfortunately he could not yet read. He began to spell A—u—s——

"That's Australia," cried the newly-recognized uncle.

Duke, somewhat suspicious, handed the coin to nurse. "Oh, Master Duke, how can you?" cried that anxious woman. "A beautiful sovereign; and you've never thanked the kind gentleman. I don't know, sir," she said, curtseying to Ralph, "if his mamma would let him take it, for my mistress is very particular—but——"

"Not take it from his uncle?" roared Ralph.

The discussion was interrupted by the sound of a step upon the gravel which made them all look round. The new-comer was an old gentleman with snow-white hair, but a ruddy wholesome complexion and the round ripe face which reminds one of a winter apple. "Frosty but kindly" was the look of the small twinkling eyes, the carefully trimmed whisker, the smoothly-shaven chin and upper lip. The old gentleman was of short stature compared with Ralph: his neatness, his perfect cleanness, his well-brushed, well-dressed, carefully preserved look, all showing to greater advantage beside the big figure of the bushman in his big checks. He walked with great activity and alertness—like a young man, people said—but there was indeed a special energy almost demonstrative in his activity which betrayed the fact that it was something of a wonder that he should

be so active. He flourished his stick perhaps a little to make it apparent that he had no need of it. He eyed the group very curiously as he walked past them to the door—and then it was that he heard Ralph's cry, "Not from his uncle?" At the sound of those words he turned round quickly and came back.

"Eh," he said, "his uncle? Who is this little fellow, my good woman? Marmaduke Parke? Then, my boy, I'm your uncle too."

Duke looked at this new claimant without the hesitation which he had shown to Ralph. There was no doubt on the most superficial examination that this was a gentleman. He took off his little hat and held out his little hand.

"How do you do?" said the little boy. "Mamma is poorly and papa is out, and I'm just come back from my walk: but if you will come in, please, Saunders will know what to do."

When Ralph gave vent to the great roar of a laugh which seemed to make a sort of storm in the air above the heads at once of Lord Frogmore and of little Marmaduke, there was more than merriment in that outburst. The bushman felt the distinction which the little boy had made, though it was only a very little boy that had made it. He assumed an additional swagger in consequence. "I'm on the other side, my lord," he said, "for I presume you're Lord Frogmore. I'm Ralph Ravelstone, the brother of the missus—but we're on different tacks, you and me. She ain't at all proud of her brother, I'm sorry to say, though I want nothing from them—not a brass farthing. So I'm clearing out of the way."

"Ah!" said Lord Frogmore. He added after a moment, "You will not, of course, expect me to interfere—people know their own concerns best."

"Interfere!" said Ralph. "I never thought of that. Tisch knows her own mind, and there's nobody I ever heard of could make her change it. Oh, I'm going. It's not good enough to hang on here in a bit of a country place like this, for anything I'll get from Tisch. Besides I want nothing from them. I've just come from the bush with dollars enough once in a way. I came out of kindness. If she don't want me I can do without her, and that's all I've got to say."

To this Lord Frogmore made no reply, save by bowing his head politely, as to a conclusion of which he might approve indeed, but which left nothing to be said. But Ralph stood swaying his big person about, not knowing how to get himself off the scene—and indeed with a sentiment of elation in the unexpected and unaccustomed felicity of talking to a lord.

"You see, my lord," he said, "through her," and he jerked his thumb over his shoulder, "we are a kind of connections, you and me."

"Oh!" said Lord Frogmore, gravely, "We are—a kind of connections?"

"Yes," said Ralph. "I'm very glad to make your acquaintance. This little beggar here is nephew to us both. It's droll if you think of it," added Ralph, stopping to laugh, "that he should be nephew to you—and also to me."

"Perhaps it is a little—droll as you say," said Lord Frogmore. Fortunately he did not think it was his own age that Ralph referred to. He thought it was indeed

a wonderful thing that he and this wild bushranger, or whoever he was, should stand in the same relationship to anyone. At this moment the footman appeared at the hall door, with a look of intelligence addressed to Ralph. The bushman started and changed into a tone of almost ostentatious hospitality. "My lunch is ready," he said, "there's sure to be enough for two. I hope, my lord, you'll come and have a share."

Lord Frogmore had left the railway at a different station from that which the Parkes ordinarily used. He was proud of his walking powers, and liked to show that he was as able for exertion as much younger men. Indeed it was his delight to surprise people who sent carriages for him and were anxious to save such an old gentleman fatigue by appearing suddenly at their door as he had done now. But so much exercise required exceptional support—and he felt the want of a glass of wine. He received Ralph's invitation with amusement but not without pleasure. "Don't you think," he said, "that we had better wait for some of the people of the house."

"Don't be shy, my lord," said Ralph. "Why, we're all people of the house."

Little Duke then stood forth, feeling the call of duty. "Mamma's poorly upstairs—and papa is out shooting," he said. "But I'm here. And it's me the next after papa."

"Oh it's you the next, little man?"

"Yes," said Duke, without guile—"first there's you, don't you know, if you're Uncle Frogmore—and when you're dead, papa—and when papa's dead, me—I'll be Lord Frogmore some day," said the boy. "And then I

shan't want your Australian sovereign, you, uncle—man —for I don't know your name."

"Oh," said the old gentleman gravely, "so you'll be Lord Frogmore."

CHAPTER X.

LETITIA was in her room, by the open window, wrapped in a warm dressing-gown. It was rather cold, though the day was bright, to sit by an open window; but she was watching for her brother's departure, and very eager, thinking he would never go. She had been an unseen witness, behind the curtain, of his meeting with her boy, and had partially overheard the conversation that had passed; that is to say, she had heard all Ralph's part of it, but not Duke's little voice in reply. Letitia was more impatient than words can say of this encounter, and trembled with nervous anxiety and helpless eagerness. But she said to herself that Frogmore at least would not come till the afternoon, and all the other gentlemen were out, and the coast clear. No one arriving at a country house to pay a visit ever came before the afternoon—five o'clock, that was the earliest moment possible for an arrival. She said this to herself with a presentiment which she could not overcome, but for which she reproached herself, declaring that it was nonsense audibly in the turmoil of her excitement. Why should Frogmore arrive at an hour when nobody arrived, merely to distract her, Letitia? Things are very perverse sometimes, but not so perverse as that. She said to herself that she was a fool for dwelling upon such a thought, and that her nervousness about Ralph

was absurd. She dared not show herself at the window lest he should see her and insist upon an interview; and from where she sat she could see only by a hurried glance now and then, so that she remained unaware of the full horror of what was happening until she heard a third voice, not familiar, but which after a moment she recognized, and which was to her as the clap of doom. Frogmore! She pulled the curtain aside, forgetting her precautions in the excess of her excitement; but no one of the group saw her, they were too much occupied with themselves.

Lord Frogmore had not appeared much in his brother's domestic circle. Since her marriage Letitia had seen him only during the three or four days' visit which John and she paid once a year to the head of the house. He went abroad every winter, taking care of himself, as if his life were of so much importance! and had visits to pay in the visiting season which no doubt he liked better than going to see his brother: at all events they had met very little, and Letitia was not so very familiar with his voice that she should recognize it at once. But even before she recognized she divined. Of course it was Frogmore: who should it be but the one person in the world whom she was the least desirous to see? She was so overwhelmed by the thought that the meeting which she so much wished to avoid had taken place, that the heart which seemed to beat in her throat and the fluttering of all her nerves prevented her from hearing what they said, until the sound of steps made her again pull back the curtain, and she watched the group moving leisurely towards the dining-room. Ralph was doing the honours, he was inviting

Lord Frogmore in to luncheon, and little Duke, whom she would have liked to whip, had abandoned his nurse and was walking solemnly between the big bushman and the little old gentleman. Oh! how she would have liked to whip Duke! It was the one possible outlet for her feelings which Letitia could think of in the immense irritation that possessed her, in view of this insufferable combination, Ralph doing the honors of John Parke's house to Lord Frogmore. If she had only been wise enough to prevent it—to listen to her own presentiment, to have been on the spot herself and prepared for whatever might happen. Sometimes it is highly advantageous to adopt the female expedient of a headache; to find yourself unable to come downstairs on some particular morning when there may happen to be any embarrassing business. But sometimes this expedient is not so successful. Letitia repented bitterly the employment of it. She had been determined not to see her brother—to show him in the most decided way that her house was a place to which he was not to come. But how could she ever have anticipated that Lord Frogmore would appear at such an unlikely hour, and that it should be Ralph—Ralph of all people in the world that would receive him, and do the honours of the house to him! After a pause of rage and perplexity, Letitia rang the bell, and when her maid appeared sent her somewhat imperiously for Mary Hill. "Go and tell Miss Hill I want to see her. Tell her—I mean ask her," said Letitia, with a civility born of necessity, "to come directly, please." Mrs. Parke paused again to think which would be most impressive; whether to begin to dress with the air of being quite unable for the exer-

tion, or to fling herself down upon the sofa in the lassitude of the dressing-gown, unable to move. She decided for the first of these processes. It would touch Mary more to see her preparing to do her duty at any price, than merely to witness the collapse which perhaps she would not have such complete faith in as was desirable. Accordingly Letitia rose. She pulled out the first dress that came to hand in her wardrobe. Not to diminish the effect, she waited until Mary might be supposed to be approaching. She then hurried out of her dressing-gown, and began to put on her usual clothes, and was found by Mary, on her hurried entry, half fallen upon the sofa, panting and breathless, fastening, with hands that trembled and seemed hardly capable of performing their functions, her under-garments. Mary made an outcry of surprise when she entered the room, and the maid who followed made a dart at her mistress with a scream—"Madame, you're not fit to dress or go downstairs."

"What can I do?" said Letitia, with little pants between each two words, "when I am so much wanted—when I must—I must."

"Oh! what is the matter, Letitia? Can't I do it for you?" said Mary, in her impulsive way.

"You may go away, Felicie. Miss Hill will help me if I want any help. Oh, Mary, don't you know what is the matter? Shut the door after that prying woman. They all want to have their noses in everything. It's Ralph," said Mrs. Parke, throwing herself back on the sofa as in despair. "He has not gone away after all, and Frogmore has come. Oh, Mary!

when I begged and implored you upon my knees to get him away, and not to let him meet Frogmore."

Letitia threw herself back on her sofa while in the act of tying a pair of necessary strings. Her hands were trembling very perceptibly. She dropped the strings and flung her arms over her head in an outburst of tragical distress. Mary, on her part, had retired in tears from her interview with Ralph, and had shut herself into the little back room, which was all, in the present crowded state of the house, that she could call her own, with much real agitation and distress. But when she saw Letitia press those conspicuously trembling fingers on her face, the sight of her friend's trouble was more than she could bear.

"Oh, Letitia," she said, "I am so sorry for you—what can I do? If there is anything I can do, tell me. I did speak to him. I begged him to go away, and he said he would. Oh, if there is anything more I can do I will do it. But don't kill yourself, don't take on so dreadfully. Don't, oh don't think so much of it, Letitia; Ralph——"

"Don't mention his name," cried Mrs. Parke, "never shall I think of him as a brother. Do you think I've no pride and no feeling for my family. How would you like if your black sheep—if the one that was no credit—turned up just when you wanted to put your best foot foremost. Oh, Mary Hill! I don't blame you, but he never would have come but for you."

"You are quite mistaken, there," said Mary, with a dignity in which there was some touch of irritation, too. "And I am glad to say there is no black sheep in my——" Her voice sank as she added this—and a

compunction seized her and broke the sentence short—for to be sure the black sheep in the family is the misfortune and not the fault of the rest, and Mary felt it was ungenerous to remind Letitia of her own better fortune. She went on, with a little eagerness to conceal this error. "If I can do anything, Letitia—but I don't know what I can do."

"No, nor I," said Letitia, but then she said with a softened voice, "you might go down and see what they're doing. I can't be ready in a moment, it takes some time to get into one's dress when one is all of a tremble as I am. You might go down and stand between Frogmore and Ralph. Oh, I know you could do it. And there is Duke, the little wretch, listening to all Ralph's stories. Send him up to me straight off."

"I—go down! But I don't know Lord Frogmore—and Ralph."

"I hope you know Ralph at least. Mary Hill! You told me this moment you would do anything—but the moment I name the one thing, the only thing I ask of you——"

Mary wrung her hands but turned away and went downstairs. She had never been used to resist when anything was asked of her. It had been her part in the world always to do what was insisted upon, what it was necessary to do. She went downstairs, almost counting the steps in her reluctance, hoping that Letitia might relent and call her back, yet knowing very well that nothing would make Letitia relent. After her conversation this morning with Ralph to go back as it seemed voluntarily into the room where he was, to go as he would think on purpose to have a last word with

him was intolerable to her. Her natural modesty and reticence was intensified by primness, old maidenly scruples which had come upon her with advancing years and made her pride more sensitive and her fear of compromising herself more great. And before Lord Frogmore, who would think—what might he not think? Poor Mary went slowly across the hall. Oh, if Letitia only knew what it was to put such a commission upon her—but Letitia had such different ways of thinking—Letitia might perhaps have found it no trial at all.

When Mary went into the dining-room where Ralph was making an excellent meal, and telling stories of the bush which delighted his little audience, her colour was heightened, her dove's eyes were clear and humid, almost with tears in them. She had seldom in her life looked so well, though of this she was quite unconscious. Her great reluctance gave her an air of dignity as well as that of duty painfully fulfilled. She went in very slowly, holding her head higher than usual, though it was a sense of humiliation and not pride that so moved her. Lord Frogmore had been persuaded to join the bushman in his luncheon, having evidently been assured that this was the luncheon of the house, Letitia not being well enough to be out of her room. Ralph was seated at his meal with his mouth full, talking as he munched, and praising the excellent cold beef as he talked. Cold beef for Lord Frogmore! Saunders indeed had endeavored to interfere, to explain that the family lunch was an hour later, that this was only for Mr. Ravelstone because of his train, and that to set cold beef before the distinguished guest was the last thing in the world that could have been contemplated.

But Lord Frogmore had paid no attention, and sat quite pleased, mincing his cold beef into small morsels, and laughing at Ralph's stories. Little Duke had clambered up upon his high chair and sat between the two men, turning his small head from one to another as they talked with great attention, with the precocious civility of a host paying solemn attention to his guests. Duke did not laugh at the Australian's jokes because he did not understand them, but he gazed at Lord Frogmore who did, and looked from one to another with a curious consciousness of the inferiority of those mysteriously excited persons who gesticulated and declaimed and laughed and applauded, to his own small gravity and dignity, something like that which we can imagine rising in the consciousness of an intelligent animal at sight of human eccentricities. Duke thought it very funny that they should laugh so much. What was there to laugh about? Ralph sprang up from the table, making a great noise, with his knife and fork in his hands, when Mary appeared. "Hallo!" he cried. "Here we have begun like a couple of ill-bred pigs without thinking of Miss Hill. A plate and napkin for Miss Hill, and look sharp you there! What can you think of us to begin without you? I give you my word I never gave it a thought."

"Please sit down," said Mary. "I want nothing. I only came—that is Letitia sent me—to see that you had everything you want. To see that there was a proper lunch——"

"Letitia's very kind, but she might have come herself. There's excellent cold beef—isn't it excellent, my Lord Frogmore? They think it's not good enough

for you, evidently, but it's plenty good enough for me. I prefer it to all the kickshaws in the world. Sit down and try a bit, Mary, it'll do you good."

"Oh, thank you," said Mary, drawing nervously away. "Duke, you are to go upstairs to your mother. Oh please don't disturb yourself. I would rather not sit down, please. Letitia was afraid that you were not served in time—that you might be kept too late for your train."

"Letitia's very anxious about my train," cried Ralph, with a big laugh, but he caught Mary's alarmed look at Saunders, who stood very demurely behind Lord Frogmore with his ears wide open to everything. Saunders scented a mystery, and was very anxious to fathom it. He scented something much more mysterious, as was natural, than anything that existed. "But sit down, Mary, and join the festive board," continued the bushman, "a meal's twice a meal when there's a lady present. Don't you think so, Lord Frogmore?"

Lord Frogmore had risen up with old-fashioned courtesy when he saw Mary, and stood without taking any part in the invitation, awaiting what she intended to do, with his hand on the back of his chair. Lord Frogmore, as ill-fortune would have it, was seeing the house of the Parkes, which was indeed the most orderly and well-governed of houses, in the strangest light—a light that was not at all a true one, though he had no means of knowing it. The wild, bearded brother from the backwoods, the gentle, somewhat prim dependent lady puzzled him very much. Miss Hill he thought a much pleasanter type of woman than his sister-in-law, but who was she? Probably the governess; but then the

governess would not be on such familiar terms with the brother. The old gentleman stood with true civility, doing nothing to increase the embarrassment of the poor lady, poor thing, who did not know what to do.

"The dog-cart, sir, is at the door," said Saunders, solemnly, "and if I might make so bold, there is just twenty minutes to get the train."

Ralph put down his knife and fork. "I should have liked another bit of that nice cold beef," he said; "but since you're all in such a hurry—— Little 'un, you can go and tell your mother I'm off. It'll be a satisfaction to her. And, Mary, don't forget what I said."

"I don't remember," said Mary, "that you said anything particular. Ra—Mr. Ravelstone—I will tell Letitia—anything you wish me to say."

"Then tell her," cried Ralph, "I don't care that!" with a snap of his big fingers. He paused, however, with a thought of Saunders and the proprieties, and burst into another laugh. "You can tell Tisch that the cold beef's capital, and that I've enjoyed my luncheon —and the best of company," he said. "Good-bye, my lord, and good-bye, little 'un. Mary, is this how we're to part, you and me?"

Mary wrung her fingers out of his grasp. "I will give Letitia your message," she said.

"You'll come and see me off at least. Poor Mary, don't be so down because there's strangers here. Come out and see me go."

She looked involuntarily in her distress towards the courteous old gentleman who stood quietly observant with his hand on the back of his chair. Lord Frog-

more did not understand the meaning of the appeal in her eyes—whether she wished him to go away; whether she looked to him for protection. He took out his watch, however, on the chance that it was the latter, and held it up to the departing guest.

"Well, good-bye to you all!" shouted Ralph, thus driven by moral force to the door.

"I fear the gentleman will be late," said Lord Frogmore in his precise voice.

"Oh, I hope not!" cried Mary, clasping her hands. She listened while the dash of the dog-cart from the door, as Ralph sprang into it, was audible. "He has been long absent from home," she said. "He has got out of the ways of—English life. Mrs. Parke was rather afraid—She was so sorry not to be downstairs to receive you. She is dressing now to be ready for luncheon, and begged me——"

"It was quite unnecessary; I found him very amusing. And I was glad to make acquaintance with this little fellow." Lord Frogmore put his hand on Duke's head, who had not obeyed the call to his mother. "He is—your charge, perhaps?"

"Oh no," cried Mary, with a blush. "I am only a friend staying in the house."

"I beg you a thousand pardons," said Lord Frogmore.

CHAPTER XI.

WHEN Mrs. Parke came downstairs she exhausted herself in civilities to her old brother-in-law, and in apologies that she had not been there to receive him. She had been much upset she allowed by the appearance of her long-lost brother quite unexpectedly on the previous night. A brother who had given the family great anxiety, and whom it was most necessary to send home at once for family reasons. The explanation was very well given and very plausible, but there was one thing upon which Letitia insisted too much, and that was the fact that she had not expected Lord Frogmore until the afternoon. Her imperfect breeding and still more imperfect taste made her insist upon this with an emphasis which conveyed a reproach to Lord Frogmore for his premature arrival. He made her a very serious apology, though with a twinkle in his keen old eyes which Letitia (though so clever) was not clever enough to detect.

"It was very thoughtless on my part," said Lord Frogmore. "I will be more considerate on future occasions. It is of course ridiculous to arrive in the morning, when the mistress of the house has of course a thousand engagements. I will remember the hint you give me to regulate my future conduct." Mary, who

was present, was very uneasy at this covert satire, but Letitia did not perceive it.

"I am sure I did not mean that you were not most welcome—at any time, Frogmore. I hope neither John nor I need to say that—but only that it is more usual later, and that I was not prepared. Nothing would have prevented me from being down in time, not if I had died for it, had I been prepared."

"I can only be most happy that you were not prepared—for what would I have said for myself, or what would John have said to me, had a life so precious been placed in danger by my indiscretion?" said Lord Frogmore with a bow. He was a little formal in his modes of speech and in his civilities, which had an old school deference about them quite unknown to the new generation. There is nothing easier than to give a dangerous scratch under the cover of that velvet glove of supreme good manners, but it takes a delicate perception to perceive sarcasm, and Letitia did not find it out.

Lord Frogmore on his side was more amused than he had expected by the reception he had met with. He belonged to a class perhaps more frequent nowadays than in former times; the class to which the follies of its fellow creatures is more amusing than anything else that can be met with in the world. The old lord expected to pay a very dull duty visit to his brother, whom he esteemed as a good hearted blockhead, and the sharp little underbred woman who was his wife. He had scarcely hoped to be amused, even by Letitia, whose little pretentions he believed himself to have fully fathomed and seen through, and he did not expect to

find amusement in the society to be found in their house. It was a quite unexpected felicity to be received by the big bushman with his stories of adventure, and the unexplained family complication coincident with his presence and the evident desire to get rid of him shown by all the house. Mary, too, who was not the governess, and who under her little middle-aged primness was an observer like himself, and saw what he meant when Mrs. John remained quite impervious, interested the old lord. There was something to see and note where he had expected nothing, something to find out in the perfectly *banal* household. The old gentleman's little keen eyes quickened and sparkled, and that wonderful interest in human life which is nowhere so strong as among those who have reached its furthest limit, awoke in him with a grateful hope of satisfaction. In the midst of this, which was on the whole agreeable, there was one little prick which had been given quite unintentionally by the most innocent hand, yet which he could not forget, notwithstanding all his philosophy. It was what little Duke had said when he had welcomed his uncle with immediate recognition of what was due to him. "First, there's you," Duke had said, "and when you're dead, papa, and when papa's dead, me—I'll be Lord Frogmore some day." This was quite true and quite innocent, and meant no harm; but Lord Frogmore could not get it out of his mind. He had of course been aware since John Parke was born that he was to be his successor, heir presumptive, as the peerage said: and of course little Marmaduke was John's heir—heir apparent, the undoubted hope of the illustrious race of the Parkes. But, still,

all the same, it jarred upon the old gentleman. He did not like to be put away in his coffin in the family vault in this summary way, not even the chief figure there, but followed by John after him, in order that this cocksparrow should become Lord Frogmore. He knew it was absurd, and he was able to laugh a little at John's dismissal too, thus accomplished by his little son. But with all the alleviations to be procured in this way, and the evident simplicity of the child who meant no harm, it was still not pleasant to contemplate. "First, there's you, and when you're dead, papa, and when papa's dead, me." Lord Frogmore laughed to himself and wondered how John would like it: but John was young, and probably would not mind a reference to such a remote possibility, and then it was John's son, not an unknown little boy, who was the speaker. He wondered if that was the sting of it—an unknown little boy—his nephew, indeed, but young enough to be his great-grandchild—a mite of a boy! To realize a long life like Lord Frogmore's, an important life, so much in it, so many people dependent upon it, a life which had lasted so long, an institution in the country—and then to think that it was to be swept away to make room for that imp in knickerbockers! It was ludicrous, it was laughable—but the thing which put a sting in it and made it so disagreeable, thrusting itself in among other thoughts of far more importance, was that it was true. "I'll be Lord Frogmore some day." It was so. Uncle and father must give way to him. They would be put away into their niches and he would reign. This kept coming back into Lord Frogmore's mind as he walked about the place and inspected the gardens

and shrubberies. It flew in upon his thoughts when they were occupied with matters quite different—little Duke's look and his childish confidence. "I'll be Lord Frogmore, some day." It came back to him with a persistency which he disliked very much but could not get rid of. It was quite true—unless in any way Providence should interpose.

There were only two ways in which Providence, even Providence, could interpose. One was a very sad way, that little Duke should die; that he should never come to the heritage which he was quite right in thinking certain. The little fellow might die. This was an alternative that Lord Frogmore, though distinctly irritated by Duke, and resentful of his self-confidence, did not like to contemplate. Die—oh, no! He would not have the little fellow die—a creature so full of hope and promise—oh, no! Let him say what childish follies he pleased he must not die. But if not, then he must succeed and be Lord Frogmore. Was it absolutely certain that he must be Lord Frogmore?

Frogmore turned this over in his mind as he took his walk—the walk which he never intermitted, and which had done so much to keep him in health. Needless to say that the dearest wish of this old gentleman was to keep in health. The young people may be indifferent to it; they may commit all sorts of rashness, and run all manner of risks; but when a man is drawing near seventy he knows he must not be guilty of any of these follies. Frogmore thought a good deal about his health, avoided everything that could injure it, denied himself even things that he liked, eat sparely, rested often, and avoided all subjects that were dis-

agreeable, on principle, that nothing might affect his precious health. But he could not get this childish brag—this little boy's chatter out of his mind. It was very annoying; it was not worth troubling about; but he could not get it out of his mind. Nevertheless, for some reason or other, he stayed longer at Greenpark than he had any intention of doing. He remained on from day to day, to Mrs. Parke's annoyance yet pleasure.

"It is clear that Frogmore likes being here," she said to her husband with some pride.

"Yes," said John, "but it's a bore."

"It *is* a bore," said Letitia, "but it always looks well to be on such good terms with the head of your family: and most likely he will do something for the children."

"I don't see what he can do for the children; it will all come to us naturally," her husband said.

"Oh, John, *naturally!* How can you talk such nonsense? naturally he will leave everything he can away from us: but if he takes a liking to the children!" John was obliged, as he usually was, to allow that there was a great deal in what Letitia said.

One afternoon, however, she received disagreeable letters, which had a disastrous influence on Letitia's temper. They were letters about Ralph. She had not very much communication nowadays with her old home. Mr. Ravelstone of Grocombe and his sons had no habit of writing. There was not a woman in the family save the wife of the second brother, who had married a housemaid, and naturally she did not attempt to correspond with her sister-in-law. But on this occasion old

Mr. Ravelstone wrote, and Willie Ravelstone wrote, and there was a letter from Ralph. Why did you send him here? the father and brother asked in tones of despair. Why didn't you make him go back? While Ralph himself wrote with jaunty familiarity and sent his love to Frogmore, who he said was a jolly old cock, and to whom he meant to write very soon. Letitia was irritated beyond description by these letters. Her sense of superiority to her own family was great, and to be thus called to account by them was intolerable. And Ralph's boisterous nonsense and his bravado about Lord Frogmore drove her to a kind of frenzy. She turned, as was natural, upon the only person she could assail with the most perfect impunity, upon Mary, at whose head she had almost flung Ralph's letter. The letters came to Greenpark in the afternoon. The gentlemen were all out, or so she thought, and there was no restraint upon the mistress of the house. The drawing-room was a double room, one within the other. And as ill luck would have it Lord Frogmore had retired to the inner portion with the newspaper before his sister-in-law came in. She had taken back Ralph's letter from Mary, who followed her into the drawing-room, and now flung it on the table with an exclamation of disgust.

"I do not believe," she said, "that he would ever have come here at all, Mary Hill, but for you. It was you who took him in, and instead of telling him, which was the best possible excuse, that the house was full, though you knew it was, to the door: and I had to get up a story about the covers to make room for Frogmore, whom it's of so much importance to keep well with: instead of getting rid of him in this way with just a

simple story—*and true*—you gave him your own room —your own room! determined at any risk you'd have him here. What for, in the name of goodness? For you couldn't marry him—though, indeed, one can never tell what a woman will be silly enough to do."

"You know, Letitia," said Mary, deeply wounded, and with some vehemence, "I would not marry your brother—not if he had everything the world could give."

"You say so now—when you know that he is not in that mind: but you were not of the same opinion then. You gave him your own room that you mightn't have to send him away."

"Oh, Letitia," said Mary, "you have always put people in my room when there was any crowding. You have done it twenty times. It seemed so rational: and how was I to know? Your own brother——"

"Oh yes," cried Mrs. Parke, "the sort of brother to bring forward among the gentlemen and exhibit to Frogmore! Oh you knew very well how I should hate it. You did it to be revenged upon me. You wouldn't take the trouble to get him out of the house when I sent you to do it. And now here's father abusing me for sending him home—as if it were any doing of mine. I don't understand you, Mary Hill, after all I've done for you. You know you have not cost your father a sixpence all this year. I gave you the very gown on your back that you might look nice, and brought you into the best society: but you'll not take any trouble or do a single thing for me."

"Oh Letitia," said poor Mary, and there was the sound of tears in her voice: presently she added

tremulously—"There's nothing I would not do—if I could only be the housemaid to have my proper work and know what was expected of me."

"Oh, yes," cried Letitia sarcastically, "I think I see you at the housemaid's work. You like a great deal better to look nice and play the lady and make up to the gentlemen."

Mary rose hastily to her feet. "If that is your opinion of me," she said hurriedly, "I had much better go away."

"Oh, yes," cried Letitia again, "that is the only other way with people like you—go away! That is the first cry as soon as you are crossed—when you know I have nobody to help me, not a creature I can trust to? But what do *you* care? What does it matter how worried I may be: I can't go away if things go wrong; but you can threaten me—it is nothing to you——!"

"What do you want me to do?" cried poor Mary. "You know it is not true that I make up to the gentlemen. I never did at my youngest—and it would be a strange thing if I were to begin now."

"Mary Hill," said Letitia with solemnity, "you know you thought Ralph was your sweetheart when he went away——"

"If I ever was such a fool," cried Mary with spirit. "I saw well what a fool I was the first words I exchanged with him. You could not wish so much that he should go away as I did—and you cannot wish so much as I do never to see him again!"

"Well! I hope Ralph Ravelstone is as good as any Hill at all events!" Letitia cried. Her brother might be odious to herself, but as is usual in such circum-

stances she resented disapprobation from others. "If you hadn't thought so you would never have let him in —and Frogmore would never have seen him—and I shouldn't have been ashamed in this way: and now you pretend you never want to see him again! It is just the way with—with—people like you. You pull yourselves up by other people's hands and then you turn upon them. And here you have been currying favour with old Frogmore."

"I—with Lord Frogmore!"

"Yes, you—finding his gloves for him, cutting up the books for him—showing him the way about the grounds—or whatever he wants. And what do you expect you are to make by that? Do you think he will put you in his will? But all he has is ours by right. It ought to go to the children, every penny. And do you think he minds what you do—an old maid? Not a bit. If there is a thing that men despise, it is an old maid."

"Letitia," said Mary, with a trembling voice. "It will do no good for you and me to quarrel. If you ever say anything like this again I will go away from your house that very day. Lord Frogmore is a kind, good man; he is nicer to me than anyone in this house. Perhaps the gentlemen here do despise old maids If they do, I think it shows that they are very silly to despise anybody for such a cause. And it is not very pretty of you to say it. But if ever you speak to me of making up to anyone again——"

"Oh, you are just a fool, Mary Hill. Of course, I say whatever comes into my head when I am just mad with everybody: and everybody is against me—you too."

And it became audible in the next room that Letitia in her turn had burst into angry tears. Lord Frogmore had remained quite still in his seat while this conversation was going on. He had not thought it any harm. He listened and sometimes a smile flitted across his face, sometimes a frown—at one point he started slightly—but no sense of guilt in his eavesdropping was in the mind of this depraved old gentleman. When, however, there occurred this outburst of tears, and it became evident that Mary was occupied in soothing her friend, and that Mrs. Parke was being laid down on the sofa and propped with pillows, that a cup of tea was spoken of as likely to do her good, and every sign was given of a permanent occupation of the other room, Lord Frogmore began to feel much confused as to how he was to escape. There was a glass door which led into the garden, but it was no longer in use as the weather was growing cold—and to get through a window even from a room on the ground floor was a perilous attempt for a person of his age. It was, however, the only thing to be done. He opened the window as softly as possible and slipped out—leaving as few traces as he could of his escape. But the sounds, however softened, could not but produce a great effect on the ladies in the outer room. Mrs. Parke sat bolt upright on the sofa, stopped sobbing as if by a miracle, and shivered to the very tips of her toes. Who was it—who could it be?

"Run round and see," she whisperered hoarsely to Mary, pushing her off as she stood beside the sofa. "For goodness sake, don't stand and stare, but run round outside and see."

CHAPTER XII.

Lord Frogmore had divined the course that would be taken by the ladies, and as soon as he escaped he hurried off in the opposite direction, from which, when Mary reached the door, he was visible tranquilly sauntering towards the house. He called to Mary as soon as he saw her at the door. "Miss Hill! I have been trying in vain to find my way to Marsham Ponds. Have you time to show me how to go?"

Mary begged him to wait a moment and returned to reassure Letitia. "Whoever it was it was not Lord Frogmore. He is out in the West shrubbery trying to find the way to Marsham, and he wants me to show him. Whoever it was it could not be he."

Letitia drew a long breath of relief. "Well," she said, "no one else matters much; but for goodness sake never let us begin to talk again without seeing if there's anybody there."

"Do you want me," said Mary, "or can I go? I will tell Felicie to come down and give you your tea."

"Oh, you can go—it's better there should be someone to amuse Frogmore: but don't you think you'll get anything out of him, for every penny he has should come to the children. Now remember what I say."

"I want none of his pennies," said Mary indignantly —but it was with a sense of relief that she got her hat

and went out to Lord Frogmore, who was more kind and understanding than any other visitor at Greenpark had ever been. They had all taken her undisguisedly for a dependent, all treated her in the easy and unguarded way which unfortunately is the common way of treating a governess or companion, with that manner of contempt—or perhaps it would be most kind to say indifference—which an old maid who is poor and modest is apt to meet with. Her remarks were not noted—her opinions elicited no response; if she was silent, as she most frequently was, nobody cared. But Lord Frogmore always heard her when she said anything, and asked her what she thought of this thing and that. It pleased poor Mary to be considered like other people, on the same level as the rest—whom inevitably in her own mind she had begun to regard with an involuntary responsive scorn as stupid and without feeling. She thought better of her neighbours because she herself was placed in her right position by the sense, the appreciation, or—as she called it—the kindness of old Lord Frogmore.

They went along together through the copsewood which surrounded the trim clearing of garden and tiny park in which the house was enclosed. It was brown and red with autumnal colour and shining in the sun with autumn damp, the heavy dews of the morning which had settled down in the afternoon to a sort of suspended wateriness which made the bushes and the grass glisten. But it was not cold, the afternoon sun diffused a ruddy glow through the air, to which the red and yellow trees added each their suggestion of a contributed light. They had talked about the house, about

the weather, so fine for the time of the year, and about Marsham Ponds, which made a picturesque point in the landscape, as they went along, and it was after a little pause that Lord Frogmore began.

"I am going to say something to you, Miss Hill, which perhaps you will consider I have no right to say —but you must remember that I am an old man."

"You may say what you please, Lord Frogmore. I know it will be kind," said Mary: and she added after a moment with a smile, "But I think it is a mistake to suppose that age can be counted merely by years."

"I am glad you are of that opinion," said the old lord. "I sometimes think so myself; but one is never a good judge in one's own case. Don't you think, however, my dear young lady, that you are yourself in rather a false position here?"

Mary looked at him with a quick change of colour and a glance of interrogation.

"You know," he said, "I took you for the governess. I have never ceased to be ashamed——"

"There was nothing to be ashamed about, Lord Frogmore. I wish I were the governess—then I should not be in a false position—but I don't know enough to teach any one."

"Not even Duke?" he said with a smile. "You are too humble-minded, Miss Hill; but that would not suit Mrs. Parke so well as having all the advantage of you as you are. May I ask, is there any relationship to give her such a claim upon you?"

"Oh, no! But we are very old friends. My father is the Vicar of Grocombe, where all the Ravelstones live."

"Ah," said Lord Frogmore, with a look of satisfaction, "that explains the familiarity of that big fellow—that Australian: not so bad a fellow as his sister seems to think."

"Oh," cried Mary, with a shudder, "he is very rough and very coarse. He has always been the trouble of the family. I am afraid of Ralph, too; but I knew him very well as I knew them all when we were children. Letitia used to come a great deal to the vicarage——"

"I will be bound she came for help for herself, not for you?"

"Oh, don't say so, please. I am sure she was fond of mamma. She had no mother of her own. And she is very kind now. Lord Frogmore, I need not conceal," said Mary, with a sudden flush, "that we are poor. It is quite a poor living, and my father has had to send all the boys out into the world. Unfortunately, we girls have not any education or we might have helped."

"So much the better, Miss Hill."

"Oh, don't say so!" said Mary, "if you knew what it was to feel so helpless, not to be able to do anything: and just to have to live on and on dependent on your father, good for nothing, with nothing to look forward to. I am saying a great deal more to you than I ever said to anyone, Lord Frogmore. Letitia has been very kind. She asked me to come for a long visit so that I might be no expense at home."

"And reminds you of it every day," said the old gentleman.

"Oh," said Mary, off her guard, "how should you know?—not every day—oh, no, no! Sometimes I need

to be reminded, for a thing that becomes familiar one is apt to forget. They are very kind at home, and say they miss me more than the good it does them. But I know it is an ease to my father's mind. He thinks it is one at least provided for."

"Do you think you are provided for, Miss Hill?"

Mary hung her head. "I am for the moment. I am sure Letitia is very kind; but if there was any change, or when she really has to get a governess——"

"Should you be sorry to go away?"

"Oh, never sorry to go home," said Mary, with a gleam of light in her face. "I'd rather starve with them than feast with others—but so long as it is an ease to poor papa's mind. He is not so strong as he was—he is getting old."

"About my age, I suppose?" said Lord Frogmore.

"Oh, a great deal more, certainly a great deal more!" cried Mary. She gave, however, a sidelong glance at Lord Frogmore's face to make quite sure. "And he has had a hard life. That makes a man old more than years."

"You were good enough to say the same thing before," said the old lord, "that age cannot be counted by years. That is always a pleasant thing to be said by the young to the old."

"But I am not young," said Mary, with a little, frank laugh. "I am middle-aged, which many people think is the worst of all."

"In that case I must borrow your formula, and say age is not counted by years," said the old gentleman. "You have a face on which peace is written. You have not had much trouble, I think, in your life?"

Mary grew very serious, for this is an imputation which few people can accept without a protest. But as she was very sincere she assented, after a moment, "No; only being poor. And what is that when all the boys, thank God, have done so well?"

"Is that the only trouble you can think of?" said Lord Frogmore.

"The chief—the greatest. When you have to be ashamed of a brother, or to watch him going wrong, and able to do nothing, and never to trust him. There is nothing in the world so dreadful as that. I can forgive Letitia anything," cried Mary, almost with vehemence, "when I think how well all our boys have done, and that two of the Ravelstones—— That is the most dreadful of all."

"I don't think it will interfere with Mrs. Parke's rest," said Lord Frogmore, calmly. "And I saw no harm in the Australian. Will you tell me what the boys are doing who have done so well?"

He listened with great interest while Mary, with a brightened countenance and many smiles, made him aware of the successes of "the boys." They were not very great successes from Lord Frogmore's point of view, but he listened as if he had been hearing of bishoprics and woolsacks, while Mary told of the prosperity of John, who was in New Zealand, and George, who was farming in Canada, and the missionary who had won golden opinions, if not joys, in Africa, and the soldier, who was in India with his regiment, but could not afford to come home because of the lessened pay. They were all "abroad" for it was so difficult to get anything to do at home, but all so approved, so well spoken of, so

thoroughly satisfactory! It went to the old lord's heart to see her face of exultation, her happy pride in her family. "Perhaps you will think it is nasty of me to rejoice so over them, when there is poor Ralph so different," said Mary, "but of course there was a great, a very great, difference in their upbringing: though that doesn't always tell, as perhaps you know, Lord Frogmore."

"Indeed I do know: sometimes the most carefully trained go astray. I have known many instances."

"And the most neglected," cried Mary, "whom nobody could have expected anything from, sometimes turn out so well! So that shows it is individual—it is in them, whatever may be their education. Ah, here we are," she said, suddenly, calming down from the fervour of her previous tone, "at Marsham Ponds." One would have said Mary was disappointed to find herself so soon at the end of her walk.

Marsham Ponds were a series of fishponds, a trace of the old time, when a great abbey had stood near, and the supply of fish for Lenten fare was a pressing necessity which to be provided for. "I think I must turn back now," said Mary, "you will find your way quite easily, Lord Frogmore."

"Stop a little; we may as well return together. I wanted the walk, not to see the ponds. I have seen them often before," said Lord Frogmore. "We lived at Greenpark in the old days when I was a child—if you can suppose I ever was a child." He laughed and paused a little, then resumed, "I remember—it must be about a hundred years ago—my father bringing me here when he came to the title. He succeeded his

grandfather you may have heard. He brought me here, and lifted me up to see the view. It's not much of a view," said Lord Frogmore, in a parenthesis, "but seen in one particular light it is not without interest. He said to me, 'Look there, Duke, that's all ours——'" Here he paused again, looked over the wide landscape, which was flat and fell away into long blue depths of distance, and then burst into a laugh. "That is what John will be saying to another little Duke one of these days. They are both primed for it," he said.

"Oh, Lord Frogmore, not Mr. Parke—that is not in his thoughts."

The old lord turned round upon her with a little moisture in the corner of his eye. He put out his hand to her hastily, "Thank you, Miss Hill. I think you are right. My brother is free from such thoughts."

"Nobody has any such thoughts," said Mary, but not in the same assured tone.

He shook his head and looked at her smiling, "Not after what your friend said—that all I had belonged to the children, every penny—that it was their right. Mrs. Parke was very explicit, Miss Hill."

"Oh," said Mary, in a tone of horror, "then it was you after all, and you heard what we said."

"I heard you say nothing that did not do you honour. The other did not surprise me at all. It may be a little premature. Things may not be so certain." He paused a little as if he would have said something more. He was a very neat, well-preserved model of an old gentleman, not so old as the Parkes concluded; with a good colour, a good figure, a firm light footstep; active and lively notwithstanding his age. The thought

of little Duke, who was to be Lord Frogmore some day, and of all his property and possessions, which were being discounted by Mrs. John as belonging to the children, made him not sad but angry. He had never been disposed to be a passive person, to be managed by those about him; and no one could be less likely to consent to being powerless or helpless now. No one thing of all the many things they calculated upon was certain. His property was still in his own hands—even his title. Many things surged up in the old gentleman's head. Suggestions which disturbed and excited him, but not unpleasantly. What if they might be disappointed altogether, the scheming woman, the silly little boy. John—Ah! John! Lord Frogmore turned upon Mary Hill, who was walking by his side, much agitated and in a great tremour; and put his hand upon her arm. "Miss Hill," he said, "I can't tell you how much I am obliged to you for doing justice to my brother John."

"Oh, Lord Frogmore, Letitia is like all mothers, she thinks only of her children. She did not mean what you think. She is not without heart. She is——"

"We'll say nothing about Letitia," said the old lord. "But I am thankful to you for doing justice, and making me do justice, to my brother John."

CHAPTER XIII.

Lord Frogmore stayed for some days longer at Greenpark. He caught cold—quite a slight cold, not worth making any fuss about, if he had not taken such tremendous care of his health, Letitia said, scornfully. She said to her husband that she really could not pretend to coddle and take care of him for such a nothing—it would look as if she had a mercenary motive—as if she meant to wheedle him out of something for the children. John did not quite like this tone, for Frogmore was his own brother after all, and Letitia was only a Parke by marriage. But he said, "I don't know why you should trouble when Miss Hill is here." So this was how it ended. Mary was made over permanently to Lord Frogmore to amuse him. He did not want nursing. Rogers, his man, who knew exactly what to do in any emergency, took care of that. Rogers was so clever that he was half a doctor, having studied all his master's ailments, and knowing in every possible combination of circumstances the right thing to administer. It filled Mrs. Parke with mingled consternation and awe to see all the precautions that were taken.

"Why, he will never die," she said to Mary. "His exercise and his food and every habit he has are like a doctor's book. Felicie tells me such stories about his clothes; he is dressed by the thermometer, if you will

believe me—and things put into his bath to strengthen him and brighten him up; and all kinds of preparations of food. It is Rogers' whole work looking after him, day and night. What a cooking up of the poor body, Mary Hill! It's against Scripture, and every law."

"But there's nothing wrong in keeping one's self well."

"Oh, well! it is not that—it is trying to get the better of Providence, not to speak of poor John and the children. What he means is never to die."

Mrs. Parke was really alarmed by this determination on the part of the man to whom her husband was heir. All those precautions, (which, if not positively sinful, were so little consistent with the desire to be at rest, which ought to be the prevailing sentiment of old people) were intended to keep John out of his inheritance—to prevent herself from becoming Lady Frogmore. If the old lord succeeded in his wicked plan of living on to an indefinite time, John and she might be old people before they came to their kingdom—nay, more horrible still, John (who took very little care of himself) might die first and leave Letitia only Mrs. Parke for ever, even though little Duke might come to the title. This was a contingency which filled her with horror. She felt that she would willingly have seized the old gentleman and shaken him—but then reflected again with dismay upon his trim, steady figure, his alert walk, his rosy countenance. He looked, when she came to think of it, stronger than John! He had Rogers to watch over him night and day. He had Valentine's Meat Juice and Brand's Essence (if these concentrated comforts were then invented) administered to him when-

ever he felt a sinking—he had some sort of elixir of life put into his bath. What he intended was never to die. Mrs. John Parke became pale with the horror of this thought, and she felt that she could not endure the old egotist, the selfish, self-absorbed old man. "It is all I can do to be civil to him at dinner and ask after his cold in the morning. Do for goodness sake amuse him a little, Mary Hill. You don't feel it as I do—you've no cares to distract your mind, and it's far easier for you to put on a face and sympathize with people about nothing than for me. I'm too sincere for that sort of thing," Letitia said.

"But don't you think it might be better to pay him a little attention. Just to show that you are interested. If it were only for half-an-hour, Letitia."

"Oh, what is the good of having you in the house with nothing to do if you can't manage a little thing like that for me, Mary Hill!"

Mary was silenced, and had no reply to make. She had herself no objection whatever to read the papers and talk to Lord Frogmore. He was very kind. His nice old ways, which were very precise and regular, almost, she said to herself, like a lady's ways, suited Mary, who was a little prim in her middle-aged decorum. She had no objection to the entrance of Rogers with his little cough mixture, or digestive pill, or cup of soup. On the whole, perhaps, she liked the little fuss of invalidism, the cares, which a little ailment or any amusing little illness which meant nothing demanded. To draw out the screen so as to shield the old gentleman from an imaginary draught, to change for him the arrangement of his cushion and his footstool, to put book and

paper cutter ready upon the little table when she herself was called away, was really pleasant to her. And when he declared that a slight cold was quite an agreeable thing in pleasant company, and that it was delightful to have a right to so many little attentions, it gave Mary a serene pleasure to find herself so useful. Another part of her duty was not perhaps so justifiable, but she discharged it with devotion. She accounted for the absence of Letitia in an unvarying round of praiseworthy ways. She made a fancy portrait of Mrs. Parke, which was beautiful to behold. She was so devoted a wife, taking every trouble from John, leaving him free for his shooting and all his amusements. She was so excellent a housekeeper, making it possible by her good management to entertain a great deal, which was so good for her husband. She was the best of mothers, giving so much of her attention to her children.

"I am coming to believe that my sister-in-law is not a woman at all, but a bundle of virtues," said Lord Frogmore.

"Oh, not that!" cried Mary, with a blush, "not that at all. She has her faults, of course—but her whole heart is in her own family, to do everything for them——"

"At all events she has one great quality—she has the art of making a devoted friend," said Lord Frogmore with a smile which made Mary blush again.

"Oh," she cried, "I am of so little account. I can never do anything for her—except the smallest things."

"Such as taking care of an old bore with a cold," said the old gentleman. Mary felt that she had not

been warm enough in Letitia's praises, for he never shook off that cynical look, while certainly Letitia might have showed him a little more attention. Mary wondered sometimes if it was true that she herself found it easy to make up a face and sympathize with people, and if Letitia was, as she said, too sincere. She found herself sympathizing with Lord Frogmore in a way which perhaps was absurd, for he was not ill: he was really enjoying his cold and all the attentions it procured him. It was bad weather, and there was no temptation to go out. It was not as if he were really ill, and it was an act of devotion to nurse him. Was she making up a face? Mary said to herself. "No," with a little indignation. She did not feel herself to be insincere. Still, perhaps, it was easier for her than for Letitia to show sympathy with other people's troubles, whether they were small or great.

Lord Frogmore got better and went away, having considerably outstayed the original limits of his visit. And to tell the truth his going was a great relief to the household, except to Mary, who missed him very much. The Parkes by this time had got rid of their visitors, and were themselves setting out upon a little round of visits to taste other people's dinners and shoot other people's covers. On such occasions, which occurred periodically, Mary was left in charge of the house. She had to keep the servants in hand, which was not an easy task, for they all knew that she was a dependent without wages; and naturally held her authority very light; and she had to watch over the children, to send for the doctor when he was wanted, to superintend the nurses, to keep everything in the established routine.

It was not a pleasant office, for nobody in the house chose to be subordinate to a poor lady who was not even the governess—who was only a friend and of no account personally, living on the kindness of the mistress of the house. This did not account, however, for the excitement with which she rushed into Letitia's boudoir on the morning of their departure, looking alternately very red and very white, and scarcely able to speak for an agitation which took away her breath.

"Oh, Letitia, can I speak to you?" she cried, bursting into the room in a manner quite unlike her usual soft movements. Letitia was at the moment superintending the shutting up of her box, in which all her best dresses were, and which was reluctant to close.

"Well, my dear, you can speak as much as you like; but as for expecting me to pay any attention just at this moment when I am in the agonies of packing! Kneel on the lid, Felicie, and I'll try and turn the key."

"Letitia, please, just a moment. There's something which I want to tell you—to consult you about."

"You are the oddest creature in the world, Mary Hill. Consult me! when the carriage is nearly at the door, and all my things to pack. *C'est fini* at last, Felicie—*Fermez le* bonnet-box, too, and give me my keys. Well, what is it, Mary? You don't speak."

"I can't tell you before anybody," said Mary in a low voice. "I've got a letter——"

"Oh, you've got a letter! I can't send Felicie away, because there are so many little things to do—but she doesn't count. I say all sorts of things before her. Is it from one of the boys?"

"No, Letitia. Oh, please, a moment—it's very important."

"It's from Ralph, and he's asked you to marry him? I never thought he was such a fool. And I hope you're not going to be a fool to snap at him—with not a penny between you," Letitia added, growing red. "That's all the advice I am going to give. You're old enough to judge for yourself—but neither you nor he must look for anything from us. Neither money nor influence—we shall do nothing for you—nothing! You may as well know that from the first."

Mary had been white and trembling with agitation; now she turned red with one of those sudden fits of exasperation which attack even the mildest. To have this said to her before the waiting maid, who concealed a smile and a look of intelligence which had flashed into her eyes under a demure gravity, was enough to have upset the temper of a saint.

"It is not from Ralph," she said very quietly.

"Oh, it's not from Ralph. Well, that's a very good thing. Felicie *attachez les* straps—or leave them for Robert to do, if you like—and bring me my cloak. Well, so it is not from Ralph, Mary? Then who is it from? It's a proposal one can see from your face. Take it whoever it comes from, Mary. You haven't time, my dear, to pick and choose."

"You will let me speak to you in your room, Letitia?"

"There's no time," said Mrs. Parke. "Felicie, *mon chapeau*, and my gloves. There's the carriage. I've only one piece of advice, Mary—take it if it's a decent offer. You can't expect to get many more at your age."

"It is more than a decent offer. Oh, Letitia, it is from an old gentleman, one much older, and far above me."

"Did you expect a young one?" said Mrs. Parke. "I think you would be very, very silly to stand upon that. I know who it is. It is old Dr. Hilton; and just an excellent match—an admirable match—the very thing I should have wished for you. Old! I hope you are not such a fool as to think of that! Think of your father and mother, and the use you might be to them. And as for far above you, why you're a clergyman's daughter, you are in the same rank in life. Mary, mind what I say to you. Don't be a fool."

"But it's not Dr. Hilton. Oh Letitia, only a moment! I must speak to you."

"There is John calling," said Mrs. Parke, composedly. "Good-bye, Mary, I can't stop a moment longer. Take care of the boy, and mind you don't let Saunders and the rest get the upper hand. Who can it be if it's not Dr. Hilton? But whoever it is, mind what I say. What does age matter? If he can support you, and leave you something when he dies, take him, take him, Mary Hill—at your age what could you expect more."

Mary followed her friend downstairs. It was of no use saying any more. Mrs. Parke had many directions to give as she went away. She had to say good-bye to the children who were in the hall to see the last of mamma. She had to silence John who was calling to her, to quicken Felicie, who lagged behind. "Mind you take care of the boy," she said, looking back, waving her hand to Mary. "Mind you keep everything going: and you can write and tell me all about it. Nurse, if

there is anything the matter call Miss Hill at once, and she will know what to do. Ta-ta, baby; good-bye, Duke. Mind you're good till I come back: and good-bye, Letty and Johnny, be good children all of you. Felicie, what on earth keeps you always behind?"

Then the carriage rolled away, followed by the cab with Felicie and the boxes, and stillness fell upon the abandoned house; stillness at least so far as the sitting-rooms were concerned; but a louder note than usual from the nurseries, and a jovial hum in the servants' hall, where everybody felt their holiday had begun.

Mary went back into the house from the doorsteps, on which she had been standing dazed, contemplating the carriage and Felicie's cab as they rolled away. She came in like a ghost, her face very pale, her limbs trembling with an agitation which was only increased by the fact that Letitia was now permanently out of hearing, and that there was nobody left from whom she could ask any advice. She wandered up and down the different rooms for some time, seating herself here and there for a moment, then springing up again to try another chair and another position. At last she went into the library and sat down upon a low chair before the fireplace. There was no fire in that room, which was not a room ordinarily much frequented by the ladies of the house, and the first to fall into the neglect which characterizes a house from which the masters are absent. The fire had not been lighted though it was November and a dull cold day. Mary sat down upon this little chair by the cold hearth, and she covered her face with her hands and leaned her head against the arm of the great chair which stood close to

her. Here for a moment she could rest and think. She sat quite still for a long time in the absolute solitude of the place, and covered her eyes from all external distractions—but it would scarcely be just to say that Mary was thinking, much less that she was wisely balancing the good against the evil, and making up her mind what she should do.

It would be more just to say that her mind went whirling round and round like the scientific toy which represents processions of moving figures flying past, steeple-chases, hunting fields, negro contortionists, Christy minstrels. Everything was going round and round with Mary. She herself seemed only to be looking on, seeing the whirl which was going through her brain. It settled down a little after a time and solidified into the neat little figure which for so many days had occupied the chair on which she was leaning. Her thoughts all paused, stopped short in the whirl of them, and standing aside like so many country attendants allowed Lord Frogmore to reveal himself in the silence. There he stood, active, small, alert—with his short white curling locks and ruddy colour. There he sat with his precise little ways, his cup of soup, his cough mixtures, Rogers, his man, taking such care of him. Mary's heart jumped up and began to throb in her ears and jump in her throat like the piston of a steam engine. Lord Frogmore! And she had his letter in her pocket, a nice letter, a letter full of respect and honour, setting her in so high a place, doing her justice and far more than justice, Mary thought. No sign in all he said of the old maid at whom Letitia had assured her, and she herself had found, men laugh. Lord Frogmore showed

no consciousness that she was an old maid, that she was past her bloom, that she was poor and he was doing her a great honour—oh, not a sign of that! If she had been a duke's daughter and a creature beautiful as the day, the old gentleman could not have written with more tender respect. Mary was not without pride, humble woman though she was, and she had received many a wound among Letitia's careless friends and visitors, wounds of which she was too proud to say anything and too good to resent, but of which she had deeply felt the sting. But out of Lord Frogmore's letter there seemed to have come a balm which soothed and healed her very soul. She felt herself put in her right place, respected, honoured, approved. If it did no more than this for her, it had done what words could not express. She sat hiding her face and felt this balm steal over and heal her wounds.

And it was only after this, after a long interval, after the first whirl of agitation and the hush of gratified and soothed sensation, the charm and sweetness of being at length appreciated and understood, that Mary began to think what answer was she to make?—what was she to do?

CHAPTER XVI.

It is a great wonder in morals that the chances of matrimonial elevation which may occur in the life of an unmarried woman, absolutely at any moment, should not exercise a more demoralizing effect than they do upon the feminine mind. It is always possible, not only for a girl, but even for a woman who has reached the middle of life, to have her position and prospects changed in a moment as by the waving of a magician's hand—and that probably not by any virtue or by any exertion of her own, fortuitously, accidentally, by what seems mere chance and good fortune. A poor girl, the daughter of a fallen family, with very little natural prospect of advancement in any direction, will suddenly wake to find herself a duchess, placed on the very highest pinnacle of fortune; a poor woman who has passed half of her life in a struggle with poverty will be lifted into sudden enjoyment of wealth and all that it brings. Why? By the merest chance. By pleasing someone, possibly unawares, without any intention—possibly, it is true, by the exercise of all her gifts for the purpose. And it by no means follows that these extraordinary chances involve any revolting bargain, any sale or barter of an odious kind. The girl may love her duke and the woman her millionaire just as much as if the duke was a lieutenant in a marching regiment or

the millionaire a banker's clerk. It is astonishing that women should be so little demoralized by the possibility of such an accident. It may be said that it happens rarely. Still it does happen, and everybody knows one instance at least.

Such an accident had now happened to Mary Hill. Such a thing as marriage had long passed out of her thoughts. She had gone through the ordinary process in such matters, having had her youthful dreams, her maidenly fancies, her conviction that some time, some day, the hero would come round the turn of the road, and life would change into enchantment. For a certain period in life that is to a girl the one certainty. Perhaps not to-day or to-morrow, yet possibly at any moment—a thing as sure as the rising of the sun, yet veiled in delightful mysteries and unknowableness—a vague anticipation, the poem of existence. After a time, if Prince Charming does not appear, the expectation begins to flag —a curious question, the strangest discouraging doubt creeps into the mind. Is she perhaps to be the one left out? the one to whom the enchanter is not to come? To trace the process from that first doubt, which is so startling, which gives a sudden check to life, to the calm certainty that no such thing would ever happen to her, which had long filled the gentle bosom of Mary Hill, would take too much time and space. It need only be said that Mary had accepted the position years ago. Her sister Agnes and she had long given up any thoughts of the kind. Their hearts fluttered no longer when they gazed along the blank road by which no hero had ever come. They had settled down as middle-aged women. No doubt they had both known what it

was to struggle and rebel in their hearts against the strait bondage of life that confined them, the situation of girls in their father's house which is so sweet at twenty, so little adapted to the maiden mind at forty. They had gone through all that, but had never said anything about it even to each other. Most probably they would have thought it sinful, horrible, unwomanly to rebel thus against their lot. All that they permitted themselves to say was, with a sigh, that they had no education, and could not be governesses, nor do anything. Sometimes it would come over them with a shiver that their father was old, growing older every day, and that the time must come when that dear old bare house at the vicarage would be theirs no more; but so helpless were they that it was tacitly understood between them nothing should be said of this. It would be dreadful even between themselves to put it into words that the vicar must die, to seem to calculate on the end of his existence. It lay between them, a dark point in the future at which their human life seemed to stop, but that was all. As for any piece of good fortune that might happen—above all, any proposals of marriage, that was a thing as far over and passed away as the frocks of their childhood. They had both accepted the rôle of old maid without rebellion, if, at the beginning, with a faint sigh.

And now here had fallen at Mary's feet not that thunderbolt out of a clear sky, of which people speak as the most startling image of a sudden catastrophe, but a sudden blaze of impossible light through the afternoon dullness. It was no catastrophe; and yet it gave a shock almost as great. To be suddenly made

rich beyond the brightest dreams, though indeed Mary had never dreamt of being rich at all; to be introduced into what seemed to the vicar's daughter the loftiest society in the world; to be able to help everybody belonging to her; to shed a glory upon the vicarage; to cause a thrill of pride to all the most distant of her kin; to impress the distant sisters-in-law whom Mary suspected of not being very respectful of the unmarried sisters, and of entertaining fears lest some time those unprovided women should expect something from John and George—all these suggestions played upon her, shining in her eyes like the afternoon sunshine, blinding her with unexpected light. Her heart jumped up to think of these things, then dropped down again with a sinking fall when her mind turned to the other side, and she thought of Letitia. Oh, it was needless to try to persuade herself that when Letitia said, "Don't be a fool, Mary Hill," and bade her certainly to accept the old gentleman who had proposed to her, Mrs. Parke had any perception of the real state of the case. Had Letitia guessed that it was Lord Frogmore; had she for an instant suspected that her humble friend was to be elevated over her own head, no doubt she would have given a very different verdict. Mary remembered all she had said. Her warning that nothing must be expected from Frogmore, that all he had must come to the children, her resentment with his care of his own health as keeping her out of her kingdom. Her heart sank lower and lower as she thought of this. What would Letitia say *if she knew?* Mary immediately realized that Letitia would not only say, but do everything a desperate woman could to stop it. She would

be mad with fury and passion. She would publish her wrong, her version of the story, her account of how Mary Hill had "made up" to the old lord. And yet in her heedlessness she had bidden her dependent to accept the old gentleman, of course, whoever he was, so long as he could provide for her.

Mary sat and thought over all these things till her head ached and her brain grew dizzy. She was stiff with cold and agitation and excitement when she got up at last and crept away to the dying fire in the morning-room, which was the only room where any comfort was. She knew already that to be left in charge of the house when the Parkes were away was no pleasant office. The fire in the morning-room was the only fire in that part of the house inhabited by its masters. All the rest had fallen into gloom and emptiness. Mary met the housemaids with their pails as she went upstairs—a thing, it need scarcely be said, never visible when Mrs. Parke was at home. She saw Saunders as she crossed the hall lounging in his shirt sleeves, and smelt the footman's tobacco. Nobody cared to keep up the decorum of the household for Miss Hill. Who was Miss Hill? Less, a great deal, than an upper servant, who was well paid and knew his place. Nobody had the least intention of putting himself or herself to any restraint or inconvenience to please Miss Hill. Mary knew this very well, and knew it would be necessary to ask as little as possible in order to avoid impertinence. She knew that she was not wanted, that she was considered a spy, left to report upon their doings and limit their freedom. She mended the fire with economy, hoping to be able to keep herself warm all day with

the contents of the coal scuttle, not to have to appeal to Saunders for more. And if they only knew! To think that she had so much in power lying at her feet, waiting her compliance. She laughed unconsciously as she thought of it, and how those impudent servants would abase themselves, and people of far more importance bow before her and put on their best smiles, and all for no virtue of hers, for no change in her, for nothing, but because she had it in her power to become Lady Frogmore.

The reader may think that in all this there was but little question of the chief matter involved, of Lord Frogmore himself, the old gentleman who had it in his power to do so much for Mary. But this did not involve the injury to him that might be supposed, for, as a matter of fact, the idea of accepting Lord Frogmore, and living with him and taking care of him was in no way disagreeable to Mary. She liked the old lord. He had never been anything but kind, respectful, sympathetic to her; he had greatly comforted her *amour propre*, which was often touched in Letitia's house and by Letitia's friends. He had even raised her own opinion of herself which had been sadly broken down by continual snubbing. In every way his society, his friendship, his kindness had been good for Mary. Love was not a thing to be thought of, it was out of date, it was scarcely modest even to suggest it: but that she could and did feel affectionately towards Lord Frogmore, Mary had no doubt, and he asked for no more. There was no drawback on that side. She could have married him had he been the clergyman in the next parish. The difficulties in fact rose chiefly from those

tremendous advantages which it was impossible to over-calculate, which seemed on the face of them too good to be true. And yet who could be injured by it? Mary asked herself. She would not have anyone despoiled for her. The children could not lose much, and what they lost would only be till she died. She was forty and Duke was five. Perhaps she might not live long enough to see Duke come of age. She would not keep the children long out of their money, and it would be very little. That was the only harm that could happen to them if she married Lord Frogmore.

It is needless to say that Mary thought of nothing else all day. She did not answer the letter, but put it carefully into her desk after having read it over three or four times, and if she hesitated as to what reply she should make, it was not because of any objection she had to Lord Frogmore.

In the afternoon she went to the nursery, where the nurse, a very fine person who considered herself much above supervision even from the mother, received her with scant courtesy. She stood over the children while Mary talked to them, and when little Letty pulled off a bit of old glove to show Mary a little sore finger, nurse made a step forward and pushed the little girl away. "I must ask you, Miss Hill, not to interfere with Miss Letty's finger. I am treating it in the proper way, and I won't have any meddling."

"But I have no desire to meddle," said Mary, surprised.

"Oh, we all know what it means when a lady is left to spy about," said the woman, turning little Letty, who began to cry, out of the room.

This was a very unpromising beginning, and nurse would not allow that the children should go downstairs in the evening to hear Mary play, and to sing their little songs about the piano.

"When their mamma is here she can do as she pleases—but I don't hold with such things," said the nurse.

Mary was all the more lonely in consequence in the twilight hour, which she was used to employ in amusing the children, and when she went downstairs later to see whether it was the design of the authorities downstairs to give her any dinner, she found Saunders in the dining-room with his elbows on the table and a bottle of wine before him, reading the paper. He looked up at the sound of the door opening, and by instinct started up, but recollecting himself fell back in his chair and confronted her.

"I consider," said Saunders, "as this room is not in the ladies' part of the 'ouse—but was you wanting anything, Miss 'Ill?"

"You surprise me very much, Saunders," said Mary, with a little quickening of the breath.

"Mister Saunders, if you please—I don't think would be out o' place, miss. I am the head man when master is away."

"I think you are very much out of place where you are, Saunders—and that Mr. Parke would not be at all pleased——"

"If he knew," said Saunders. "I don't say as 'e would. I'm a consulting of my own convenience, not thinking of him; and he'll never know."

"How can you tell that? It will be my duty to tell him at once."

"It's a duty as you'll never do. We know you well, all of us, in this 'ouse. And if you're sensible you'll take my advice. You'll be seen to, and kept comfortable, if you don't give no trouble. Cook is a-sending you up a bit of dinner. You'll be waited on as good, or better, as you were ever used to—but, Lord bless you, what's the good of pretending. You was never used to a man like me waiting upon you—and why should you now? John, he says the same thing. We're very hard worked when they're at 'ome, and we're going to have a 'oliday. It won't make no difference what you say."

"I don't care at all," cried Mary, "whether you wait upon me or not—but you will be so good as to retire from here."

"And what if I don't, miss?"

If this was a romantic tale I should recount how the man was subdued, how he hesitated and finally withdrew in obedience to the influence of her presence and the dignity of her look. But I am obliged to say that no such result followed. Saunders, who had been drinking and was just at the point when audacity is paramount, sat leaning with both his elbows on the table, staring across it at the poor lady for whom he would have had no respect whatever had she looked like a queen, and it was Mary who was frightened. She repeated, "I must ask you to retire from this room," but with a faltering voice, for she knew that she had no authority to enforce her request, and so did he.

"Sorry to disoblige you, miss, if you think it ain't becoming. But I'm very comfortable, thank ye, here."

She stood a moment irresolute, not knowing what to

do, and then it was she who retired. She said, "I will write to Mr. Parke," but Saunders replied only with an insolent laugh. And Mary hurried upstairs again with something like terror. She found the footman without his coat on the stairs, carrying down the hunting clothes which John Parke had worn on the previous day, and accompanied by one of the housemaids, who was by way of helping him, with jocular snatchings and droppings of the burden. They scarcely paused in their flirtation when Mary appeared. She said, in her mildest tones, "You forget, John, that your mistress likes you to use the backstairs."

"My missis ain't here," said the man; "it's all one the front stairs or the back stairs when they're away."

"I do not think Mrs. Parke would be pleased to hear you say so," said Mary.

"Well, she don't hear me say so," replied the man, with an insolent air.

"Oh, John!" said the housemaid, "don't answer Miss 'Ill like that. Don't you know as she's set over us to see as we does our duties, and tell everything as goes wrong?"

"I don't hold with no spies, I don't," said John, "whether they's ladies, or whether they's Irish fellows. I don't say things behind folks' backs as I wouldn't say to their faces; and I says, Miss 'Ill——"

"Be so good as not to speak at all," said Mary, quickly hurrying past. They burst into a great noise of laughter when she was gone—a shrill celebration of triumph. She got back to the morning room with a sensation of dismay, for which she had no words. She was all alone, with the household in mutiny behind her.

She was startled, however, to see that someone was before her arranging neatly enough, and with quiet care, the tray with Mary's dinner, which, according to Saunders' instruction, had been sent up there. The maid was an under housemaid—a quiet and good girl, whom Mary had been kind to. But even she had her part in the revolt. When she had arranged everything, she came up to Mary, who had thrown herself into a chair by the fire.

"I think everything's here, miss," she said. "Perhaps you will just look and see if there's anything more you will want."

"It will do very well, I am sure, Jane."

"I want to know, if you please," said Jane, "whether you will want anything more to-night: for we're going to have a party in the servants' hall; and I'd rather get it now than be called after, if you please."

"You are going to have a party in the servants' hall?"

"Yes, miss. Mr. Saunders and John is going to do some acting, and there's going to be a dance. If you'll excuse me, I shouldn't like to be called away."

"I shall not want you any more," said Mary.

She tried to smile at the festivity which had turned all their heads. But when, a little later, the sounds of the downstairs merriment came pealing up the great staircase, Mary felt like a prisoner abandoned among enemies. She had never felt so much alone as in the dreary silence of the house, with the distant revels going on. A genteel dependent scoffed at by all the conspirators downstairs—and all the while Lord Frogmore's letter in her desk.

CHAPTER XV.

This strange state of things continued for some days. Mary found herself living as in a state of siege. She was permitted to visit the children in the nursery, and nurse was quite polite. She was also supplied with what she required, her little meals sent to her, the morning-room prepared for her inhabitation, and the housemaid who attended to her civil—but otherwise she was made to understand that her position was one of sufferance, and her presence exceedingly undesirable. This was all the more strange that she had already been left alone in the house on more than one occasion with no such result, the servants, if not very anxious to please her, being always at least observant of civility, and making no stand against her. She reflected, however, that her previous experience had been only of a few days, and that a fortnight was a long time for such a community to be put under the sway of a stranger like herself, whom they had no right to obey, and whom with the spirit of their class they despised as at once better and not so good as themselves—an inferior with the appearance of a superior—far below themselves in independence, while apparently placed over them. Mary being obliged to think upon the subject by the strange circumstances in which she found herself, made all these excuses and explanations of the conduct of the con-

spirators, and ended by thinking that on the whole it was natural though very uncomfortable, and that she could quite understand their way of thinking. But there was no doubt that it was very unpleasant. Sounds of revelry reached her from the servants' hall every night; the men lounged about all day and smoked where they pleased; the rooms were locked up and nothing done. Jane, the housemaid, informed her that they all thought they had a right to a rest. "There's a deal to do in this house. Them hunting and fishing things, if it was nothing else, keeps Mr. Saunders and John in a continual worrit, special when there's gentlemen coming that don't bring a vally—and half the gentlemen here don't. We've all made up our minds as we'll have a good rest."

"They might have done that, Jane, without behaving as they have done, in other ways."

"Oh, I don't know," said Jane, tossing her head. "Men don't stand being put upon."

"You do it," said Mary. "I know that you are not doing any work, and perhaps it is not necessary; but you are civil to me."

"You was always civil to me, miss," said Jane. "I don't like to see you put upon no more than the rest. But you'll allow as it's hard upon the men, with their spirits, to have somebody left behind to spy upon them, and that not one of the family. Not quite a—one as isn't no better, perhaps—oh, I'm sure I beg your pardon, miss!"

"Well," said Mary, doing what she could to suppress her indignation, "supposing all that was true: how are they to meet Mrs. Parke when she comes home?"

"Oh, miss," said Jane, "they say you'll never tell her. Mr. Saunders says as you'll never throw us all out of our places, and put the family to such inconvenience. It would be dreadful troublesome to get new servants just in the middle of winter. If we all got our month's warning it would throw it just before Christmas as we left. Mr. Saunders says if you did do it, Mrs. Parke would just pay no attention. It would be inconvenient. And he says he's sure you'd have more consideration than to make us all lose our places. And Mrs. Cook she says——"

"I don't want to hear what they say. I think they have neither hearts nor consciences," said Mary indignantly.

"Oh, as for that, miss," said Jane, "we're just the same as other folks, I suppose. We think of what's pleasing to ourselves first."

And Mary had to admit that if they had neither hearts nor consciences they had heads, and judged the position fairly enough. For though she was very indignant and might have denounced the conspirators on the spur of the moment had she had the opportunity, she knew that her courage would have failed her when it came to the point, and that to deprive the servants of their living was what she never could have done. Saunders had a wife and family. John had a mother whom he was supposed to help. The saucy housemaid was a widow with a child. And it was also true that Letitia would think twice before she dismissed all her servants so near Christmas. The calculation was very close all round. And then the nurse, whose verbal impertinence vexed Mary most, was all the time exceed-

ingly careful of the children. There was nothing to find fault with in that respect. Mary thus felt herself caught in the meshes of the conspiracy, and did not know what to do.

And all the time Lord Frogmore's letter was locked up in her desk; and she had as yet made no reply to it. It was the thing, perhaps, on the whole which made the persecution in the house least important to her. What did it matter what Saunders and his kind might do? The humiliation which they inflicted made her smart for the moment, but it was not so bad even now as the careless civility which she had borne from their masters, or the no-account which was generally made of such a person as herself in the world. She was well used to all that. And to think that by a word at any moment she could put a stop to it all and change everything! She did not answer the letter; she could scarcely tell why. Not that it did not occupy her day and night. She thought of it in all ways, turning it over and over. It was a sort of occupation to her which obliterated everything else to think what she should say. What should she say? And then the long round of questioning, of balancing one side against the other would begin.

There was this advance, however, that Mary had come to a perfect conviction that were she unhampered by others, she herself could be happy with Lord Frogmore. To marry at all and enter upon a mode of life so entirely new is a shock to a middle-aged woman. The old maid has hindrances in her way in this particular which do not affect the girl. She has formed all her habits often with a certain rigidity, and to be brought

into relations so close as those of matrimonial life, to give up her seclusion, her privacy, to share everything with another, has a sort of horror in it. Mary too had something of the primness which in some natures accompanies that modest withdrawal from the mysteries of life. To a girl it is all romance, to a woman other reflections come in. She had moments of panic in which she asked herself how she could bear such a revolution of existence. It is, however, so deeply impressed upon the feminine mind that to be married is the better and higher state, a doctrine largely emphasized by the contempt of the foolish, that she was half ashamed of her own shrinking, and knew that everybody would consider it fantastical even if for sheer modesty she had ever breathed to anyone the confession that she felt this panic and shrinking—which was very unlikely. That was a sentiment never to be disclosed, to be got over as best she could, to be ignored altogether. But putting aside that shock to all her habits, both of mind and life, there was nothing in her which objected to Lord Frogmore. He was kind, he was old, he would need her care, her help, her services. He was the least alarming companion that could be thought of: he was sympathetic and understood her—and she thought she understood him.

But Letitia! There the struggle began. Letitia would not like it. Mary could not salve her conscience by the hasty advice given with such frankness by Mrs. Parke. To marry any old gentleman who might present himself with money enough to support her, and provide for her when he died, was one thing—to marry Lord Frogmore was another. The mere idea that Mary might be

Lady Anything while Letitia was Mrs. Parke would be an offence—but Lady Frogmore! What would Letitia say? How would she like it. She would never forgive that promotion. The thought of Mary walking out of a room before her, placed at table before her, would drive her frantic. If that were all how gladly would Mary give up to her any such distinction! But that was not all. There were the children who would, as Letitia thought, be defrauded by their uncle's marriage. That was a matter which it was not so easy to get over. She tried to represent to herself that Lord Frogmore was rich, that it was not certain he would leave all he had to the children, that in any case he would be just; and that whatever he appropriated to herself would at least go back to the children on her death. She had taken out her paper, seated herself at the table, prepared her pen (with little anxious cares that it should be a good one) to write half a dozen times at least—and had been stopped by that thought of the children. That was a thought that could not be got over. To take this away from the children, how could she do it? If she were to endeavour to make the condition that no money should be given to her (which crossed her mind for a moment), Mary had too much good sense not to see that this would be impossible, and also foolish and unjust. And then she had laid down her pen again, and put by her paper, and returned to herself to think out that problem—with equal failure. Defraud the children—take from them their inheritance—how could she do it? she who had been like their aunt, like a second mother. She retired before that thought with continued affright. It was a barrier she could not

get over. And so the letter was put off day after day.

She had met the children in their walk one morning, and gone on with them, glad of the companionship, pleased that little Letty should abandon the group to cling to her hand and rub against her with a way the child had, like an affectionate dog, and that Duke in his little imperious way should place himself exactly before her, walking a step in advance, so that Mary had to restrain her own movements not to tread on him, one of these little inconveniences which, to people who love children, are pleasant, as signs of the liking of the little tyrant. She had begun in her usual way to tell them a story when the nurse who walked majestically in the rear of the party interfered.

"If you don't mind me saying it, miss," said nurse, who was too well bred herself not to know that this mode of address was particularly offensive to a person of Mary's age, "I'd much rather you did not tell them stories."

"But!" cried Mary, with astonishment, "I have always told them stories—it's what they expect whenever they see me."

"That may be," said the nurse, "but I don't myself hold with working up their little brains like that. When their mamma is here she can judge for herself; but I can't have them put off their sleep, and excited, and not able to get their proper rest——"

"But that has never happened," cried Mary.

"It's quite soon enough then if it happens now."

"Well, no doubt that is unanswerable," said Mary, with a laugh, and she added half playfully, half vexed,

"I think you want to keep me from saying anything to the children at all."

"I don't want to be any way disagreeable, miss," said nurse, "but so long as my mistress is away and I've all the responsibility, that is just what I'd like best."

"Why," cried Mary, inadvertently. "I stayed here on purpose."

"To spy upon us and watch all we did," said the woman red and angry. "We all know that; and that is just what I will never put up with if there wasn't another situation in the world."

Mary had for the moment forgotten the humiliation of her present position which made this sudden assault almost more than she could bear. She disengaged herself with a little difficulty from the children and hurried in, feeling that she must take some immediate resolution and free herself from these insults. Saunders and the footman were playing a game of billiards in the hall when she entered hastily, the great door being open. In the extreme freedom of this new regime, Saunders, so proper and correct in the presence of his master, had fallen into habits of self-indulgence, and was, indeed, most generally under an exhilarating influence which made him very ready to exhibit his wit at the expense of any butt that might present itself, secure of the admiration and applause of his subordinates in the house. Mary had become rather afraid of an encounter with the butler in these circumstances, and started a little as she came suddenly upon him in her hurried passage indoors. He came forward to meet her with his cue in his hand.

"Well, Miss 'Ill," he said, "I hope I see you well this

fine mornin'. Been to the post to send off your report, eh; and tell how the servants is going on?"

"Let me pass," Mary said.

"We hope you've given us a good report, miss. We're nothing but poor servants a' strivin' to do our dooties," said Saunders, with an air of mock humility, which sent the footman into such screams of obsequious laughter that he had to throw down his cue and hold his sides with exclamations of "Oh, Lord, don't, Mr. Saunders! You'll kill me with laughing afore you've done."

"And if you was to give us a bad report what 'ud become of us?" said Saunders. "But we hopes you won't say nothing more than you can prove, Miss 'Ill. And what are *you?*" he added, changing his tone, "but a servant yourself, and worse off than any of us—curry-ing favour with bringing other folks into trouble, or tryin' to bring folks into trouble; but you'll not succeed this time, miss, I'll promise you. We knows what to expect, and we're on our guard. Hi, old man! what are you wanting? The bosses ain't at home; can't you see that with half an eye? Stop a bit, miss, I ain't done with you yet."

"Oh, good Lord, Mr. Saunders!" cried the footman, in a tone of alarm.

"Let me pass, please," said Mary, trembling, and quite unaware what strong succour had arrived behind.

The next sound was a firm foot upon the floor coming in— the next a voice which made Mary's heart jump up to her throat.

"Where is my brother, sir—where is your master?

and how dare you speak to a lady like that?" said Lord Frogmore.

Lord Frogmore! Saunders himself—whose countenance was a wonder to behold as he dropped the cue and backed against the table limp and helpless, his mouth open, his eyes bursting from their sockets with wonder and fright—was scarcely more discomposed than Mary, who felt herself in a moment vindicated, restored to her proper place, protected and avenged—yet at the same time more agitated and shaken than she had ever been in her life. She turned round and saw him before her, his eyes sparkling with anger, his neat small person towering, as it seemed, over the discomfited servants driven back by the first glance of him into servile humiliation. Lord Frogmore's voice, which generally was a mild and rather small voice, thundered through the hall. "You disrespectful rascal! How dare you speak to a lady in that tone?"

"My lord!" Saunders cried, faltering. At first he could not even think of a word to say for himself. The footman discreetly stole away.

"My brother is absent, I suppose, and Mrs. Parke; and you cowardly scamp, you wretched snob, you take this opportunity——"

"Oh, Lord Frogmore, don't be severe upon the man. He thought I had written about him to his mistress. Please don't say any more."

"I shall write about him to his mistress," said Lord Frogmore, "or to his master, which will be more effectual. John Parke is no brother of mine if he does not turn such a fellow neck and crop out of the house. Get out of my sight, you brute, if you don't want to be

kicked out." Saunders was twice Lord Frogmore's size and half his age, but the old gentleman made him cower like a whipped dog. He made a faint effort to bluster.

"I'm responsible to my own master, my lord: I'll answer to him."

"By Jove," said the old lord. "You shall answer to a sound thrashing if you stay here a moment longer. Out of my sight! Miss Hill," he said, turning round and offering Mary his arm, "I suppose there is some room where I can say a word to you. It is clear that you cannot remain an hour longer in this house."

CHAPTER XVI.

She took him upstairs to the morning-room, in which she had been living, and which was full of traces of her habitation and ways—the book on the table, the work, even the writing-paper and the new pen which all this time she had been trying to use to answer his letter. Her heart was beating as wildly as if she had been a young girl—beating with pride, with pleasure, with gratitude, and with that satisfaction in being vindicated and re-established which it is impossible for human nature not to feel. It was no doubt a very poor foe who had thus been flung under her feet; but he had been able to humiliate and insult her. And Mary felt as proud of her deliverer as if he had faced the dragon. His very age and physical unimportance made her only the more conscious of the force and mastery he had shown—a man accustomed to command, accustomed to hold a foremost place. What a difference it had made to everything the moment he had appeared! The very atmosphere had changed. It had become impossible for any one in the world to show her anything but respect and reverence as soon as Lord Frogmore had come. What a difference! What a difference! Mary had never filled that imposing place, never had it made evident as a matter of certainty that wherever

she appeared respect must necessarily attend her. She had been respected in her modesty by those who knew her. But no one had ever thought it necessary to give to Mary the first place. What a difference! The first inarticulate feeling in her mind was this which brought her up as upon a stream of new life. Everything had been different from the moment he had appeared. No more insult, no further call for self-assertion, no need to take any trouble. His presence did all. Where he was there would always be honour, observance, regard.

These thoughts surged through her mind as she went upstairs with him through the empty house, in which all at once instinctively, without anything said, she had become as a queen. There was no longer any question in her mind as to what she should say. All was said it seemed to Mary. Could the lady who had been delivered from the dragon think what she should say to her Redcross Knight? It was ridiculous to be so highflown—and yet it was the only simile she could think of. Dragons are different in different cases —sometimes they mean only poverty, humiliation, the spurns which patient merit of the unworthy takes, and not any great heroic danger, which the champion can make an end of: her champion had ended for her in a moment the fear of all these things. He had made her see what would be her fate henceforward if she trusted herself to him. He was a little gentleman, of short stature, of appearance rather neat than fine, resembling anything in the world rather than St. George. He was old—was he old? surely not so old as was thought—surely not as Letitia made him out, an antediluvian, a

person out of date, whom only his own egotism and the care of Rogers kept alive to keep other people out of their rights. To look at him with his active step, his eyes that grew quite bright and blue in his anger, the colour as of a winter apple in his cheek, his neat well cared for person—it was almost absurd, Mary thought, to call him an old man at all.

Lord Frogmore put her in a chair when they reached the morning-room, and bade her rest a little. "I came to see if there was not an answer to my letter," he said, "but there are other things more important to be thought of first. How long have you been here alone exposed to these impertinences? You can't be left to run such a risk again."

"Oh, it doesn't really matter now—it is all over now," said Mary, with a faint smile.

"You are trembling still," said the old lord. "I have a thousand minds yet to go and thrash the fellow."

"Oh, no," she said, putting out her hand as if to detain him. "I am not afraid of anything now."

The old gentleman took the hand which she held out. "Do you mean to give me this, Mary?" he said.

Upon this she roused herself, and with a changing colour made her last stand, "Oh, Lord Frogmore, I could do nothing that would be injurious to the children," she said.

"The children—what children? There are no children," said the old lord, thinking of himself only and his own concerns. Then he perceived her meaning with a sudden, quick start, letting her hand drop in his

impatience. "What," he said, "is it John's children you are bringing up in this ridiculous way? My dear, when John succeeds me he will be quite rich enough to provide for his own children. I have nothing to do with them. If you put the children in my way and in the way of my happiness in my old age, they shall never get a penny from me. I shall leave everything I can away from them. Be sure you will do them harm and not good, by bringing them up between you and me."

"Lord Frogmore—I would not do them harm for anything in the world."

"Well," he said, with a smile, "you will do them a great deal of harm if you bring them in between us. I remember now what Mrs. John told you. That all I had belonged to them. She is an odious woman."

"Lord Frogmore!"

"Don't say anything more, my dear. She is an odious woman. You have not found it out, because you think everybody as good as yourself. She it is who is the cause of the impudence of her servants as well as of many other wrong things. No, my dear, let Mrs. John and her brats go by. I am an old man, Mary, that is the worst of it. I can't hope to stand by you very long. Do you think you can like me well enough to give me the best chance of living to be a Methuselah? I'll live as long as ever I can if you'll share my life with me, Mary, my dear."

"Oh, Lord Frogmore!" she said.

And, as a matter of fact, Mary said very little more. They came to understand each other very thoroughly

without many words on her part. When the hour of luncheon arrived it produced no tray carried by the underhousemaid, as was usual, but John, the footman, in his best livery to announce that my lord was served in the dining-room. "You mean Miss Hill is served," said the old gentleman, sternly. And John humbly begged his lordship's pardon. Saunders kept out of sight, not trusting himself in Lord Frogmore's presence. And the way in which Lord Frogmore talked at lunch was soon reported all over the house, and carried an universal shudder. "I shall lose no time in letting my brother know what has been going on," he said. "And I don't think you should stay here any longer. Mrs. John would be unhappy if she knew to what you are exposed."

"Oh," said Mary; "they will be kinder now."

"Kinder! I could not let any lady run such a risk. I suppose they know that you would not say anything as long as you could help it. That is the penalty of being too good."

"They did not think at all," said Mary. "They supposed I was to be a spy and tell everything. But don't please take much notice, Lord Frogmore. In another week Mr. Parke and Letitia will be back again."

"You must not remain another night," said the old gentleman. "Allow me to have the pleasure of taking you home. I cannot consent to your remaining here."

John went downstairs much and deeply impressed. He told the assembled company in the servants' hall that his lordship had said nothing to him personally.

"But the rest of you may just get ready to go. Mr. Saunders won't get even his month's warning. That much I can tell you, and you'll have to clear out—but there's nothing against me."

"Nobody can say," said cook, "as I've shown any incivility to Miss 'Ill. I'm one as likes Miss 'Ill. I always did say as you was going too far."

"I've never said a word good, bad, or indifferent," said the housemaid, "since the first day: and then it was John as sauced her, and I only looked on."

"I never sauced her," cried John.

Saunders alone was silent. His confederates had all given him up as is inevitable in such circumstances, and it was very evident that there was no help possible for him. There was dismay also in the nursery, but in those regions the authorities held apart and did not compromise themselves in the servants' hall.

Mary, however, felt herself taken hold of as by a little beneficent providence when she was taken in hand by Lord Frogmore. He arranged at once a little programme for her. It was too late now to go up so far as Yorkshire that afternoon, so he permitted her to remain for the night at Greenpark, to pack and arrange for her journey. He himself in the meanwhile would remain at the railway hotel near the station, and in the morning he would come for her and take her home. It was very startling to Mary to be thus swept away. She had herself, strongly developed, the instinct of putting up with what was disagreeable—with the certainty that there were many things in life which it was impossible

to mend, and which had to be borne as cheerfully as possible. But Lord Frogmore had no mind to put up with anything. The idea of enduring a moment's annoyance which could be prevented seemed folly to the imperative old gentleman. The difference was that he had always had it in his power to prevent the greater part at least of the annoyances of life, whereas Mary never had possessed that power. He whirled her away next day in a reserved carriage with all the luxury with which it was possible to surround a railway journey—she who had been accustomed to a humble corner in the second class! and deposited her that evening in the vicarage in a tumult of joy and excitement which it would be impossible to describe. The old people, the vicar and his wife, were indeed full of alarm, terrified by the telegram that announced Mary's immediate return, and troubled to think that something must have happened to account for so sudden a journey. They had comforted each other by the reflection that it could not be Mary's fault—Mary who was always so good and patient. But an event so sudden is always alarming, and it took them a long time to understand the rights of the matter, and what Lord Frogmore had to do with it and what they had to do with him. Old Mr. Hill was not very much older than Lord Frogmore, but he was not nearly so lively either in intelligence or in physique, and it required a great deal of explanation to make him understand the real state of the case. Mary going to marry—that old gentleman! This was the first thought of the unsophisticated household. The thought that Mary was to become Lady Frog-

more did not penetrate their minds till some time after.

As for Mary herself the process was quite different. She had actually forgotten that Lord Frogmore was an old gentleman nearly as old as her father, and the idea of being Lady Frogmore had become quite familiar, and caused her no excitement. She was still troubled about Letitia, and the possible money for the children, but otherwise she had begun to regard her own prospects with a satisfied calm. It is astonishing how quickly the mind accustoms itself to a new resolution even when it entails a revolution in life. Mary was surprised, and even a little offended, that her family should have so much difficulty in understanding her position. "My dear," her mother said, "I hope you have well considered what you are going to do. Lord Frogmore is a very nice gentleman, but he is only five years younger than your father. I looked him up in the peerage. Mary, he is sixty-six."

"Is that all?" said Mary. "Letitia speaks as if he were a hundred: but, mother, for a woman, forty is almost as old."

"Oh, what nonsense," said Mrs. Hill, "more than a quarter of a century of difference. It is a great temptation in a worldly point of view, my dear, but Mary——!"

Mr. Hill was a venerable person of large bulk, whose voice came out of the depths of his throat, and who was, Mary said to herself with energy, a hundred years older than Lord Frogmore. He had a large head, with heavy white hair, and always a solemn aspect. This

big white head he shook slowly at his daughter and said, mumbling, "You must think it well over. My child, you must think it well over—we mustn't do anything rashly." As if it were possible to deliberate further when everything was settled, when Mary had brought her old lover home and accepted his escort and allowed him to disentangle her from her troubles! She felt vexed and angry with the objections, which proved what excellent people, how unworldly, and how simple-minded her parents were.

"What I think of is Tisch—and what a fuss she will be in," said Agnes, Mary's sister, in whose voice there was perhaps a note of exultation over the discomfiture of Letitia. This it was that made Mary falter and grow pale. Her first duty was to write to Letitia, and how, oh, how, was this to be done! The other remarks of her family only made her impatient with their futility—as if she did not like Lord Frogmore as well, nay better, for being old and having need of her! But Letitia! She put it off for three days, pleading to herself that she was tired, that she must have a rest; that until Lord Frogmore went away she could do nothing. To tell the truth it was a relief when Lord Frogmore went away. The shabby little vicarage on the edge of the moors was not congenial to him. He did not know what to say to the mumbling old vicar, who was so very conscious of being only five years older than his intending son-in-law, but who was a hundred years older as Mary truly felt. And there was but one spare room at the vicarage, the chimney of which, being very little used, smoked when a fire was

lit (the Hills themselves had no fires in their bedrooms on the theory that it was a piece of self-indulgence and extravagance, though coal was cheap enough), and there was not a corner for Rogers, without whom Lord Frogmore was not at his ease, nor taken care of as he required to be. These drawbacks a bridegroom of twenty-six or thirty-six might have made a jest of, but at sixty-six it is another matter. And Mary was very glad when he went away. He was to return in a fortnight for the marriage with a special licence, though there was just time for the banns to be proclaimed in Grocombe church three Sundays, a formula which the vicar would not dispense with. Mary saw the old lord away with a sense of satisfaction. But she went back to the vicarage with a cold trembling all over her. The letter to Letitia could be put off no longer.

Truth compels us to say that it was a most specious letter—a letter in which innocence was made to look like guilt, a letter full of excuses, of explanations, of deprecations, trying to show how she could have done nothing else, how no harm could follow, and yet that the culprit was conscious of a thousand dreadful consequences. The effort of writing it made Mary ill. She kept her bed in a fever of anxiety and excitement, counting the hours till Letitia should receive it, thinking, with her heart in her mouth, "Now she has got it, what will she say? What will she do?"

It did not take a very long time to show what Letitia meant to say and do. Mary thought the world had come to an end when she heard by return of post, as it were, a carriage, that is a cab from the nearest station

rattle up to the door with every crazy spring and buckle jingling as if in fury, and heard a whirlwind in the passage, and, rising up, trembling, beheld her mother's little sitting-room fill, as by an excited crowd, with two impetuous figures—Letitia, pale with passion, and behind her the imposing form of the Dowager Lady Frogmore.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE parlour at Grocombe Vicarage was but a small room and a shabby one. There was a drawing-room which was the admiration of the parish into which all visitors were shown, but Mrs. Hill and her daughters had too much respect for it to use it commonly; and the centre of their domestic life was the parlour, where all their makings and mendings were done, and where Agnes did not disdain to boil the eggs in the morning and make the toast for tea, both of which operations were so much better done, she thought, when "you did them yourself." She had been making a dress for her mother; indeed, the very dress in which Mrs. Hill intended to appear "at the ceremony," and the large old sofa which stood between the door and the window was rendered unavailable for all the ordinary uses of a sofa by having the materials of this dress stretched out upon it. Mary was in a chair by the fire with a white knitted shawl wrapped round her, much oppressed with her cold. There was a little tea kettle upon the old-fashioned hob of the grate. It may be supposed with what a start of discomposure and vexation the invalid of the moment started up when the door of this sanctuary was flung open and the visitors appeared. Fearful under any circumstances would have been the sight of Letitia

to Mary at this moment, but in the drawing-room she might at least have been kept at arm's length. She stumbled to her feet with a cry; her nose was red, her eyes were streaming, and the feverish misery of her cold depressed any spirit with which she might have met this invasion. Letitia on the other hand swept in like an army, her head high, her hazel eyes blazing like fire, full of the energy of wrath. She was a small woman, but she might have been a giantess for the effect she produced. After her there came a personage really large enough to fill the little parlour, but who produced no such effect as Letitia, notwithstanding that she swept down a rickety table with the wind of her going as she hobbled and halted in. But Mary recognized with another thrill of alarm the Dowager Lady Frogmore, and felt as if her last day had come.

Letitia swept in and did not say a word till she had reached the chair which Mary had hurriedly vacated. She had the air of bearing down upon her unfortunate friend, who retreated towards the only window which filled the little room with cold wintry light. "Well!" Mrs. Parke cried, as she came to a sudden pause, facing Mary with a threatening look. "Well!" But it was ill she meant.

"Well,—Letitia," cried poor Mary, faintly.

"I have come to know if it was you that wrote me that disgraceful letter. Could it be you? Tell me, Mary, it's all some terrible mistake, and that I have not lost my friend."

"Oh, Letitia! You have lost no friend. I—I hope —we shall always be friends."

"Did you write that letter?" said Letitia, coming a step nearer. "You—that I trusted in with my whole heart—that I took out of this wretched place where you were starving, and made you as happy as the day is long. Was it you—that wrote to me like that, Mary Hill?"

Mary was capable of no response. She fell back upon the window, and stood leaning against it, nervously twisting and untwisting her shawl.

"Letitia," said the dowager, from behind, "don't agitate yourself—and me: tell this person that it can't go any further: we won't allow it, and that's enough. We've come here to put a stop to it." Lady Frogmore emphasized what she said with the stamp of a large foot upon the floor. Her voice was husky and hoarse by nature, and she was out of breath either with fretting or with the unusual rapidity of motion, which had brought her in like a heavy barge, tugged in the wake of a little bustling steam-boat. She cast a glance round to see if there was a comfortable chair, and dropped heavily into that which was sacred to the vicar on the other side of the fire, from which she looked round, contemplating the shabby parlour and the figure of Mary in her shawl against the window. "We've come—— to put a stop to it," she repeated in her deep voice.

Now Mary, though held by many bonds to Letitia, had at the bottom of her mild nature a spark of spirit —and it flashed through her mind involuntarily that it was she who would soon be Lady Frogmore, and that this large disagreeable woman was only the dowager. *She* put a stop to it! So impudent a threat gave Mary courage. "I don't know," she said, "who has any busi-

ness to interfere; and I don't think there is anyone who has any right. I don't say that to you, Letitia. You are not like anyone else. I very much wish—oh, if you would only let me! to explain everything to you."

"She has every right," said Mrs. Parke; "and so has my husband. I suppose you don't know that this is Lady Frogmore?"

"I know—that it is the dowager," said Mary. She was aware, quite aware of what was in her heart, the meaning underneath, which Letitia understood with an access of fury. In Mary's mild voice there was a distinct consciousness that this title was hers—hers! the poor dependent, the less than governess! Mrs. Parke made a step forward as if she would have fallen upon her antagonist.

"You think that's what you'll be! Oh, you Judas, taking advantage of all I've done for you. Oh, you wicked, treacherous, designing woman! You wouldn't have had enough to eat if I hadn't taken you in. Look at this wretched hole of a place and think what rooms you've had to live in the last year—and pretending to care for the children, and bringing them to ruin! I've heard of such treachery, but I never, never thought I'd ever live to see it—and see it in you. I trusted you like a sister; you know I did. It was all I could do to keep the children from calling you Aunt Mary, as if you belonged to them; and you nobody, nobody at all! I got into trouble with my husband about you, for he couldn't bear to see you always there. Oh, Mary, Mary Hill! where would you have been but for me—and to turn upon me like this—and ruin me! I that was always so good to you!"

This address melted Mary into tears and helplessness. "Letitia," she said, with a sob, "I never, never denied you had been kind: and I love the children, as if—as if—they were my own. It will be no worse for the children. Oh, if you only would believe what I say! I asked him before I would give him any answer, and he said, no, no, it would make no difference to the children. I would rather die than hurt them; but he said no, no, that it would hurt them if I refused. Letitia!"

"Oh!" said Mrs. Parke. "So you're our benefactor, it appears. Grandmamma, this lady is going to patronize us you'll be glad to hear. She has taken care of the children before she would accept her beautiful lover. Oh!" cried Letitia, in her desperation, clenching the hand which was out of her muff as if she would have knocked down her former friend. She drew a long breath of fury, and then she said, "You think nobody can interfere! You think a noble family can be played upon by any wicked treacherous thing that likes to try, and that no one can do anything to stop it! but you're mistaken there: you're mistaken there!"

Foam flew from Letitia's lips. In her excitement she began to cry—hot tears of rage gathering in her eyes, and a spasm in her throat breaking the words. She sat down in the chair which Mary had so hurriedly vacated, overcome by passion, but carrying on her angry protest with mingled sobs and threats only half articulate. Poor Mary could not stand against the storm. A cold shiver of alarm lest this might turn out to be *true, mingled* with the shiver of her cold, which an-

swered to the draughts from the window. Hunted out of her warm corner by the fire, exposed to the chill, her heart sinking, her cough coming on, there is no telling to what depth of dejection poor Mary might have fallen. She was saved for the moment at least by the rush at the door of her mother and sister, who, after a pause of wonder and many consultations, had at last decided that it was their duty to be present to support Mary—however grand and exalted her visitors might be. They came in one after the other a little awed but eager, not knowing what to expect. But they both in the same moment recognized Letitia and rushed toward her with open arms and a cry of "Oh, Tisch!" in the full intention of embracing and rejoicing over such an old friend. "Why didn't you send for me, Mary?" cried Mrs. Hill. "I thought it was some grand stranger, and it's Tisch, our dear old Tisch! What a pleasure to see you here again, my dear!"

Mrs. Parke put on a visage of stone. She could not avoid the touch of the mistress of the house who seized upon her hand with friendly eagerness, but she drew back from the kiss which was about to follow, and ignored Agnes altogether with a stony stare. "I'm sorry I can't meet you in the old way," she said. "I was a child then and everything's changed now. We have come here upon business, and unpleasant business too. I'm glad to see you, however, for you will have sense enough to know what I mean."

"Sense enough to know what she means!" cried the vicar's wife. "I am sure I don't know what that means *to begin with, Tisch* Ravelstone! You were never

so wonderfully clever that it wanted sense to understand you—so far as I know."

"I am the Honorable Mrs. Parke and this is Lady Frogmore," said Letitia with angry dignity. "Now perhaps you understand."

"Not in the least, unless it's congratulations you mean, and that sort of thing; but you do not look much like congratulators," said Mrs. Hill. She drew a chair to the table and sat down and confronted the visitors firmly. "It looks as if you did not like the match," she said.

"The match—shall never be," said Lady Frogmore, in that voice which proceeded out of her boots, waving her arm, which was made majestic by the lace and jet of her cloak.

"It shall never be!" cried Letitia. "Never! My husband has already taken steps——"

"My son—has taken steps: the family will not allow it. They will never allow it."

"Never!" said Letitia, raising her voice until it was almost a scream. "Never! if we should carry it into every court in the land."

The ladies of the vicarage were very much startled. They lived out of the world. They did not know what privileges might remain with the nobility, for whom such excellent people have an almost superstitious regard, and the boldness of an assertion, whatever it was, had at all times a great effect upon them. For the moment Mrs. Hill could only stare, and did not know what to reply. She reflected that she might do harm if she *spoke too* boldly, and that it might be wiser to temporize. And she also reflected that the sight of a man

was apt to daunt feminine visitors who might be going too far. She said, therefore, after that stare of consternation, "I'm sure I don't know what you mean, Tisch, nor how you can put a stop to a marriage; but perhaps the vicar may understand. Agnes, tell your father to come here. I am sorry you did not take this lady to the drawing-room, Tisch, you who know the house so well. This is the room we sit in in the morning, where we do all our little household jobs. Agnes is making me my dress for the ceremony, and everything is in confusion. Dress-making always does make a mess," said Mrs. Hill, rising with dignity to arrange, yet with a quick fling of the long breadths of the silk spread out on the sofa to dazzle the spectators with a glimpse of the dress which she was to wear at the ceremony. She then addressed herself to Mary, who still stood shivering in the window. "My dear," she said, "you'll get your cold a great deal worse, standing there. Yes, I see Tisch has got your chair—but come here to the corner of the fire—she'll make a little room for you. It's a pity she should have such a bad cold just on the eve— Oh, here is the vicar. This is Lady Frogmore, my dear. What did you say, Mary? The Dowager Lady Frogmore? Yes, to be sure. And this is my husband, Mr. Hill. As for the other lady, you know very well, my dear, who she is."

"Why, it's Tisch!" said the vicar, "my little Tisch! Who would have thought it? Why, we ought to have the bells ringing—for you haven't been here, have you, since you were married, Tisch? and cheated me out of that too, which was unkind. Anyhow, you are very welcome, my dear." He took her hand in both of his

and swung her by it, which was the vicar's way. He was a large flabby old man, with much *bonhomie* of manner, and ended off everything he said with a laugh. Letitia had not been able to avoid the paternal greeting. But she pulled her hand away as soon as that was possible. All these references to her absence and to her marriage were gall and wormwood to Mrs. Parke.

The vicar looked around after this, much discomfited by finding himself ousted from his usual chair. He wavered for a moment not knowing where to go, but finally planted himself in front of the fire, leaning his shoulders against the mantel-piece. He had an old coat on, very much glazed and shabby, and a large limp white neckcloth, fully deserving of that name, loosely tied. He looked round him amiable and a little unctuous, not perceiving, for his faculties were not very alert, the storm in the air. "Well, ladies," he said, "I suppose you've come to talk things over, and all the fal-lals and things for the wedding, eh? It's astonishing what interest ladies always take in anything of this kind, though they can't be called, can they, on this occasion, the young couple?" He chuckled in his limp good humour, as he stood and warmed himself. "Only six years, I'll give you my word for it, younger than myself —and going to be my son-in-law—but Mary there doesn't seem to mind."

His laugh had the most curious effect in that atmosphere charged with fiery elements. It was so easy, so devoid of any alarm or possibility of disturbance. Tisch, who knew very well that all that could be done *was to frighten* these simple people if possible, had too *much sense* not to see that her mission would be a

failure furious as she was—but the dowager had not this saving salt. She held out her arm again with all the lace and jet. "We've come to put a stop to it," she said.

"Eh?" said the vicar. His chuckle was a little different now, and he repeated it at the end of his ejaculation, which was scarcely a question.

"They've come," said Mrs. Hill, raising her voice, "to put a stop to Mary's marriage. Don't you know? They won't have it, they won't allow it—they say a noble family—Mr. Hill, don't you hear?"

For he went on chuckling, which was exasperating, and made his wife and daughters long to seize him by the shoulders and shake him. "Oh," he said, "they're going to put a stop to Mary's marriage. How are they going to do that, my dear? Has he got another wife living?" And the vicar chuckled more than ever at such a good joke.

"Father!" and "my dear!" cried daughter and wife, simultaneously, in indignation. But the vicar went on laughing unmoved.

"Well?" he said. "We don't know much about his life. He might have had several other wives living, he's old enough. And that's the only way I know."

"It shall be put a stop to," cried the dowager, "my son has taken steps. My son has been heir presumptive ever since he was born. It shall be put a stop to. If no one else will do it, I'll do it. I'll have him shut up. I'll have him put in an asylum. He can't be allowed to ruin the family. Letitia, can't you speak?"

"My *good lady*," said the vicar, carried out of him-

self and out of his natural respect for a peeress by his amusement and elation in being sent for and looked up to as the arbiter, which was a new and unusual position for this good man. "My good lady, is it Frogmore you are speaking of?" He laughed all the time so that all the women could have murdered him. "Frogmore! I'd like to see any one shut up Frogmore in an asylum, or dictate to him what he is to do." He stopped to laugh again with the most profound enjoyment of the joke. "I think I never heard anything so good. Frogmore! Why, he's only in his sixties—six years younger than I am. Do you think you could put me in an asylum, or make me give up anything I wanted to do, my dear?" He looked up at his wife and rippled over with laughter, while she, almost put upon the other side by this appeal, gave him a glance which might have slain the vicar on the spot. The ladies of his house habitually dictated to the vicar; they put no faith in his power of acting for himself. What he proposed to do they generally found much fault with, and considered him to require constant guidance. But now for once he had his revenge. He went on chuckling over it till their nerves could scarcely sustain the irritation; but for the moment the vicar was master of the situation, and no one dared say him nay.

Letitia had taken no part in this, such sense as she had showing her that it was vain to maintain that altogether hopeless struggle. She had her own undertaking ready to her hand, and a much more hopeful one. Mary, who had been placed by her mother in a *low* chair close to the corner of the fire, was so near to *her as to be* at her mercy. The vicar's large person

standing in front of the fire shut them off from the rest, throwing a shadow over this pair; and while he occupied the entire space over them with his voice and his laugh, Letitia caught at Mary's shoulder and began another argument in her ear. "Mary Hill," she said, "you know you daren't look me in the face."

"I have done you no harm, Letitia," said Mary trembling.

"You are going to take my children's bread out of their mouths. They'll have nothing—nothing! For how can we save off our allowance? The little things will be ruined, and all through you."

"Letitia, oh, for goodness sake, listen to me for a minute. He says it will make no difference. They will not be the worse. I told him I would do nothing against them—and he says if I refuse he will cut them off altogether—Letitia——!"

"Don't talk nonsense to me, Mary Hill! Do you think he will not rather leave his money to his own children than to ours?"

"He has no children," said Mary.

"No, not now; but when a man is going to get married—"

"Letitia!"

"Oh, don't be a fool, Mary Hill! You're not a baby not to know. When a man marries—if he were Methuselah—one knows what he looks for. John and I would scorn to ask anything from you, though you will ruin us too. But the children! A mother must fight *for her children.* Poor little Duke, whom you al-

ways pretended to be so fond of—he's fond of you, poor child—he sent his love to his Aunt Mary, little thinking they will all be ruined—because of you——"

"Letitia, oh what can I do?"

"You can give him up," said Mrs. Parke, "in a moment. It will not give you much trouble to do that. An old fool like Frogmore, an old precise, wearisome old——. Why, he's older than your father: and you who are engaged to my poor brother Ralph, such a fine man."

"I never was engaged to your brother Ralph!" cried Mary, with indignation.

"You say so now: but if one had asked you ten years ago. We might make up a little something for him even now—a little goes a long way in Australia: and with someone whom he was fond of to keep him right, Mary!"

"Letitia! It is all a mistake. I never, never was fond of him."

"And now, when you might save him if you liked! This has been such a blow to him. He would marry you to-morrow and take you away out of everybody's reach. The man that was really, really, oh, you won't deny it! the man of your heart."

"I do deny it! Never, never! I would not marry your brother Ralph if—if there was not another. I would marry nobody," said Mary, raising her head, "nobody—except the man I am going to marry!"

"You will say you are in love with him next. A man that is older than your father—that has lived such *a life, oh,* such a life! all to humble us and bring us *down to the* ground—that have been so kind to you,

treated you like a sister—and trusted you with everything, Mary."

Mary knew very well that this was not true—but it is so difficult to contradict any one who asserts thus boldly that she has been kind. Perhaps Letitia meant to be kind. She could not have had any other notion —at least at first. But Mary could not be warm in her response. She said, "It is misery to me to think of doing you any harm. I would not harm—a hair of one of their heads—not for the world!"

"No—you wouldn't stab them or give them poison —but you would do far worse, take everything from them—their whole living. You would change everything for us. I," cried Letitia, tears coming into her voice as she realized the emancipation of her once slave, "would not mind—for myself. I'm used to—putting up with things—for the sake of my family; but there is John—and little Duke: their inheritance taken from them that came from their ancestors—that they've always been brought up to—everything changed for them. And all because a friend—one we've been so kind to—my oldest friend, Mary, one brought into the family by me; oh, that is the worst of it! If it had not been for me you would never, never have known that there was such a person as Lord Frogmore. They've a right to say it's all my doing. Oh, Mary Hill, it was a fine thing for me to marry John Parke, and then to bring my friends with me into the family and ruin them all!"

Mary felt herself as obdurate and hard as the neither millstone. She folded her shoulders in her shawl and her mind in what she felt to be a determined ingratitude. Yes, she was ungrateful. They had been

kind to her, but she would not give up her life for that. It was not fair to ask her. And how could she change when everything was settled? She turned her shoulder to her friend. "He said it should do them no harm, —I told him I would not consent to do them any harm."

"Oh, as for that!" Letitia cried. She leaned down close, near to Mary's ear with her hand upon her shoulder. "Mary," she said, "you're my oldest friend. We used to play together, don't you recollect? It was you who was kind to me in those days. Sometimes I've seemed to forget, but I don't forget, Mary. It wouldn't have mattered if we had cut each other out as girls—that's natural; but now! You might win the day and welcome. Get the title and go out of the room before me and all that——" Letitia's labouring bosom gave forth a sob at the dreadful possibility, but she went on. "But it is the others I am thinking of. It isn't me, Mary! And we that were always such friends."

There came from Mary's bosom an answering sob of excitement and misery, but she made no reply.

"I can understand, dear," said Letitia, putting her arm around the arched shoulders, "that now you have made up your mind to marry you don't feel as if you could give it up. I don't ask you to give it up—but oh, think how far better than an old man like that it would be to have one that was really fond of you, one of your own age, a person that was natural! Oh, Mary, hear me out. Father has settled to give him something, and we could make out between us what would be *quite a fortune* in Australia. And he worships the very

ground you tread on—and you were always fond of him you know, you know——Oh, Mary!"

"Don't you know that you're insulting me?" cried Mary, so miserable that to be angry was a relief to her. "Oh! take away your hand. Oh! go away and leave me. I won't listen to you any more."

"Mary—John told me to tell you that he had turned that insolent Saunders and all those horrid servants out of the house. He never even consulted me, and it's a dreadful inconvenience, every servant we had. But he turned them every one out of the house. You might be satisfied after that, to see how much we think of you. He said no one should ever be suffered to be insolent to you in our house. We have all esteemed you above everything, Mary. Insulting! Is it insulting to want you to marry my own brother—my favourite—and to make sacrifices that you should have something to marry on."

"Letitia," said Mary, in her passion springing up from her seat, "so long as you talk of the children my heart's ready to break, and I don't know what to do—but you shall not put this scandal upon me. Oh! no, no. I won't bear it. It is an insult! Mother, don't let her come after me. I won't have it. I won't hear another word."

For Letitia, too, had risen to her feet. She stood staring for a moment while Mary pushed past her flying. But the fugitive had no more than reached the door when she was caught by the shriek of Mrs. Parke's valediction. "Mary Hill! If you go and do it after all I've said—oh! I hope you'll be miserable! I hope you'll be cursed for it—you and all belonging to you.

I'll never forgive you—never, never, never! I hope if you have a child it'll be an idiot and kill you. I wish you were dead. I wish you would go mad. I wish the lightning might strike you. I wish——"

Letitia fell back in her chair, choking with rage and hatred; and Mary, like a hunted creature, with a cry of pain flew sobbing upstairs. The others looked on aghast, not knowing what to think or say.

CHAPTER XVIII.

When Lord Frogmore arrived at Grocombe Vicarage the day but one before his marriage, Mary was still so pale, so depressed and nervous, that the brisk old bridegroom was much disturbed. It had been agreed in the family that it would be better to say nothing about that visit, which after all, though disagreeable, had done nobody any harm. This arrangement had been consented to by everybody, but Mrs. Hill and Agnes were always doubtful whether the vicar and Mary could keep their own counsel. And it turned out that these discreeter members of the family were right. For, indeed, Lord Frogmore had not spent an hour with his bride before he ascertained the cause of her low spirits and troubled looks. He was angry yet relieved.

"I had begun to think you had found out since I left you that you could not be happy with an old man," he said.

"Oh, Lord Frogmore!"

"It was a reasonable fear. You are a great deal younger than I am, though you think yourself so old, Mary. However, if it is only Mrs. John and the dowager who have frightened you, it is to be hoped we may get over that."

Mary shivered but did not speak. It was her cold hanging about her still her mother thought, but Lord Frogmore was not quite of that opinion.

"They must have said something very nasty to take such a hold upon you. What was it? Come now, Mary. You will not make me think worse of them (which is what you are afraid of) by anything you can tell me, and it will be a relief to you to get it out."

"It was—nothing particular," Mary said; but again a shudder ran through her. "It was just, I suppose, what people say when they are very angry."

"Come, Mary. What did she say?"

"Oh, Frogmore," cried Mary at last, "she could not mean it. You know she could not mean it. Poor Letitia! she is a mother, and they say a mother will do any thing for her children. I am sure she had no ill meaning. She said she hoped I would be cursed, that if I had a——oh, I can't, I can't repeat what she said. That she wished I were dead, or would go mad, or—— No, no, she could not mean it. People don't curse you nowadays. It is too dreadful," Mary cried, and she shivered more and more, wrapping herself up in her shawl.

"The devil," cried Lord Frogmore. "The little fierce devil!—a mother. She is no more a mother than a tigress is. She hates you because after all her ill-treatment of you you will have the upper hand of her. And I hope you will take it and make her feel it too. What a woman for my poor brother John to have brought into the family! I can forgive his mother, who

is as stupid as a figurehead, but would cut herself or anyone else in little pieces if she thought it would be good for John; but not John's wife, the odious little shrew—the——"

"Oh, Frogmore," cried Mary, "don't speak of her so. I can never forget how kind she was to me."

"Kind to you—accepting all your time and care and affections and downright hard work, and giving you how much for them?—nothing. Now, Mary, there must be an end of this. She has made a slave of you. I hope you don't mean to let her make a victim of you at the end."

"Oh—she could not mean it. I don't think she could mean it; but to curse me—just when everyone, even the old women in the almshouses, send their blessing."

Mary fell into a fit of shivering again, vainly wrapping herself in the shawl to restore warmth, and keeping with difficulty her teeth from chattering. The old lord was much disturbed by this sight. He tried to caress and soothe her into composure, but elicited little save a weeping apology. "Oh, I beg your pardon, Frogmore."

"Mary," he said at length, "I suppose we've both agreed as to the source from which blessings and curses come—or rather, let us say good fortune and bad, for I don't like to credit God with the curses, for my part."

Mary, a little startled, looked at him with wide,

open eyes, the tears, for the moment at least, arrested. She was not sure whether he was not about to say something profane, and as a clergyman's daughter she felt it her duty to be on her guard.

"Well," said Lord Frogmore, "I shouldn't, for my part, think the people who call down curses were very likely to be heard up there—do you think so, my dear? If they are it is not in accordance with anything we know. Curses are only in use in romance books. And as for believing that Mrs. John has any credit in that quarter I don't, Mary. I'd back the old women in the almshouses against twenty Mrs. Johns."

It was very profane—still it introduced a view of the subject which proved, after a while, consolatory to Mary. She recognized reason in it. And the presence of the old lord, who was so cheerful and self-possessed, and was afraid of nobody, was also very supporting, as Mrs. Hill said. He had the confidence of a man who had always been accustomed to have his own way, and to be baulked by nobody, which is a great prop to the minds of people who have the persistent sensation, due to the records and traditions of many failures, that something is always likely to interpose between the cup and the lip. Lord Frogmore did not take any such contingency into consideration. When he found that Mary's cold was so obstinate he changed all his plans with the most lordly indifference to calculations and resolved to take her to the Riviera for what he had too much sense to call the honeymoon. "Moons," he said *to Mr. Hill*, "do not drop honey when the bridegroom

is sixty-seven, but I hope to make it very pleasant to Mary for all that." And this was exactly what he did. The marriage and all the little fuss and excitement—for the parish was moved from one end to the other for the vicar's daughter and her wonderful match—shook her up and roused her spirits. And she wanted to do credit to the old lord, and would not have him carry off a bride with watery eyes and a red nose. So that even before they left Grocombe, Mary had recovered herself. She had few wedding presents, for her friends were not rich enough to send anything worthy of a lady who was going to be a viscountess. But there was one which moved her much, and amused the old lord. The family at the hall had taken no notice of what was going on in the vicarage—indeed it was so rough a man's house that the amenities of life were disregarded altogether. But the day before the wedding Ralph Ravelstone, who had been known to be at home, but had showed very little, appeared at the vicarage with a stable-boy behind him leading a colt. He went in to the house, leaving this group at the gate, and paid his respects to the family, where he was received without enthusiasm. "You see I've come back," he said.

"Yes, we heard you had come back," said Mrs. Hill.

"Mary would tell you. I'm rather put out about Mary. I always meant," said Ralph, "to marry her myself. Oh, I don't mind if Frogmore hears. He's a connection of mine and very jolly. I always meant to marry her myself."

"You showed your good taste, Mr. Ralph; but I am glad that I was first in the field," said Lord Frogmore.

"That's what it is to have plenty of money," said Ralph, with a grave face. "You see things on the other side didn't turn out as well as I expected. I've brought her a wedding present, though. He looks leggy at present, but he's a good sort. You wouldn't know his sire's name perhaps, but it's well known in Yorkshire, and if he's well trained he'll make a horse. There he is at the gate. I don't say but he looks a bit leggy as he is now——"

"Oh—is it that foal? I am sure it was very kind of you, Ralph," said Mrs. Hill, in an extremely doubtful tone.

They had all gone to the window to look, and for a moment there had been some perplexity in the minds of the ladies as to which of the two animals visible was the wedding present—the half-grown stable-boy or the neglected colt. Mary repeated, still more doubtfully, "I am sure it is very kind of you, Ralph," and there was a momentary pause of consternation. But this Lord Frogmore disposed of in his brisk way.

"We'll send him to the Park," he said, "where I don't doubt he'll be attended to; and who knows what races you may not win with him, Mary. She shall run him under her own name. We'll make the Frogmore colours known on the turf, eh, my dear? Mr. Ravelstone has given you a most valuable present, and for my part I am very much obliged."

"Lord Frogmore always speaks up handsome," said Ralph. "I saw that the first moment we met at Tisch's little place. And that little shaver, don't you remember? By Jove, now he'll have his little nose put out of joint."

It was not perhaps a very elegant joke, and the ladies took no notice of it save by alarmed mutual glances between themselves. But Frogmore—the refined and polite little old gentleman, Frogmore, with his old-fashioned superiority in manners, Frogmore—laughed! There was no doubt of it—laughed and chuckled with satisfaction.

"Well," he said, "such things can't be helped. It's best in all circumstances not to count one's eggs before—— My brother John's family were, perhaps, what we may call a little cocksure."

"I don't know much about your brother," said Ralph. "But, lord, I shouldn't like to come in Tisch's way when she knows. Oh, she knows, does she? I'd just like to see her face when she reads it in the papers. Tisch is a fine one for pushing on in the world, but when she's roused——"

"Ralph," said Mrs. Hill, "you might be better employed than speaking against your sister. She has been very kind to Mary; and Lord Frogmore would never have met my daughter at all if it had not been in her house."

"That was all the worse for me perhaps, Mrs. Hill," said Ralph.

"You are quite right, my dear lady," said Lord

Frogmore. "We have all I am sure the greatest respect for Mrs. John. She has made my brother an excellent wife, and she has put me in the way of acquiring for myself a similar blessing." He made this little speech in his precise way, quite concluding the argument, and even quieting Ralph in a manner which much impressed the ladies. But the big bushman shook his head and his beard as he went away. "That's all very well," he said, "but if Tisch has ever a chance to come in with a back-hander—" He went off continuing to shake his head all the way.

Fortunately, Mary did not notice this, being diverted by the perplexity and embarrassment caused by Ralph's "leggy" gift, what to do with it, how to find accommodation for it in the little stable at the vicarage, already occupied by an old and self-opinionated pony, very impatient of being interfered with. But Mrs. Hill and Agnes shook their heads too behind the bride's back. If Tisch ever had it in her power to do an ill-turn to Mary! Even all the excitement of the wedding preparations could not banish this thought from Mrs. Hill's mind. She impressed upon her other daughter the oft-repeated lesson that there is no light without an accompanying shadow. "In the course of nature," said the vicar's wife, "poor Mary will be left a widow to struggle for herself. It is true that the settlement is all we could desire—but if Tisch is at the back of it, her husband being the heir, how can we know what may happen—and your father an old man, and me with so little experience in the ways of the world——"

"But, mother," said Agnes, with hesitation, "Mary is

not so old, she is only two years older than I am. She may have——"

"Oh, my dear! Heaven forbid there should be any family!" cried Mrs. Hill lifting up her hands and eyes.

CHAPTER XIX.

MARY came back from her travels a most composed and dignified young matron, bearing her honours sweetly, yet with a mild consciousness of their importance. I say young, for though she was forty she had always preserved her slim youthfulness of aspect, and the unwrinkled brow which belongs to a gentle temper and contented soul. She looked younger as Lady Frogmore than she had done as Miss Hill. The simple dresses, which were perhaps a little too simple for her age, had not become her so well as those she now wore, the rich silks and velvets which the ladies at the vicarage felt and pinched and admired with an elation of soul in regarding "Our Mary," which it would be impossible to put into words. Mrs. Hill herself had now a velvet dress, a thing to which she had looked wistfully all her life as the acme of female grandeur without any hope of ever attaining it; and Agnes had been supplied with a little trousseau to enable her to pay in comfort her first visit to the Park. But when Mary appeared in the Frogmore diamonds at the head of her own table, receiving the best people in the county, Agnes was silent in awe and admiration. For Mary Hill, who had never asserted herself anywhere, *had insensibly* acquired the self-possession of her new

rank, her sister could not tell how. And the little old gentleman beamed like a wintry sun upon his household and his guests. Impossible to imagine a kinder host, a more delightful brother-in-law. He was good to everybody who had ever had to do with Mary: the old aunts in London; even, oddly enough, Ralph Ravelstone, who had so frankly informed Lord Frogmore of his intention to marry Mary had all gone well with him. There had been an additional little episode about Ralph which nobody knew of, not even Mary herself. For Lord Frogmore had received from Mrs. John Parke, a day or two before the marriage, the note which Mary had written to Ralph begging him to meet her at the sundial in the grounds of Greenpark on that eventful day on which Lord Frogmore had made his first appearance. The reader may recollect that this note had been an urgent appeal for an interview, Letitia having demanded of Mary that she should send Ralph away. Lord Frogmore burnt the little note, which, indeed, was evidently a note written in great perturbation of mind, and drew his wife into conversation upon the events of the day, from which he very speedily came to an understanding of the situation, and the exact character of Mary's intercourse with Ralph. He replied by a most polite note to Letitia, informing her that he was very glad to be able to do, in response to her friendly recommendation, something for her brother—not, perhaps, equal to his merits, but the best that was in his power—by making Ralph agent for his Westmoreland property. There was not very much responsibility, nor a large income, but at all events a life of activity and freedom which he believed was in consonance with Mr. Ravelstone's habits

and tastes. Letitia was entirely overwhelmed by this communication. She grew pale while she read, overawed as by a superior spirit.

It will be well, however, to draw a veil over the behaviour of Letitia at this trying moment of her career. She had reason to be angry. There was scarcely any of the lookers on at this drama of ordinary life who did not acknowledge that. All her actions for years had been shaped by the conviction that sooner or later she would be Lady Frogmore. She had married John Parke on that understanding. It is possible, indeed, that, as no one else offered, she might have married him anyhow, for the substantial, if modest, advantages which his individual position secured. But nowadays Letitia did not remember that, and felt convinced that she had married him because he was heir-presumptive to Lord Frogmore. Who could say now when that designation might be erased from the peerage? And even if it were never erased, there was still the humiliating certainty that Mary—Mary Hill—was my Lady Frogmore, a fact that produced paroxysms almost of madness in the bosom of Mrs. John Parke. And she had a right to be angry. Even Mrs. Hill allowed this. To have had for years only an old bachelor between you and your highest hopes—and then that he should marry at sixty-seven! If ever woman had a grievance, Letitia was that woman. A certain amount of rage, virulence, revengeful feeling was what everybody expected. It was even allowed that the fact of the interloper being a dependent of her own—a useful old friend—made things worse. She was bound, indeed, for her own sake, to preserve *appearances a little* more than she did; but, except in

that respect, nobody blamed her. It was a very hard case. And more than by anybody else was this felt by Lady Frogmore, who did everything that woman could do to conciliate Letitia. She sent endless presents to the children, invited them to the Park—endeavoured in every way to keep them in the foreground. She even urged that Duke should spend as much time with them as possible, in order that Lord Frogmore should get to know his heir! His heir! Poor Mary insisted upon this—repeated it, lost no opportunity of directing attention to the fact—good heavens!—until at last one day——

One day—it was early in the year, a day in spring, when she had been married for more than a twelvemonth, and had quite got used to her position, and felt as if she had worn velvet and diamonds, and a coronet upon her pocket-handkerchiefs, all her life. Mary had got so used to it all that when a stranger, in a London shop, or a cottager, or any person of the inferior classes called her ma'am instead of my lady, she was much amused by the mistake. And she had forgotten all evil prognostications, and was almost happy in a sort of truce with Letitia, kept up by the presents and the visits and numberless overtures of amity which it pleased her to make, and which Mrs. John condescended to accept. She had begun to think that all was well, and to know herself to be happy, and to feel as if nobody could ever be ill or die, or fall into trouble more.

When suddenly Mary made a discovery—the first suspicion of which threw her into a faintness which made the world swim all about her. It was a beautiful day, full of light and life and hope. The birds were

twittering in every tree, talking over their new nests and where to build them, flitting about to look at different sites. Mary was out walking in the grounds, rejoicing in the lovely air, when suddenly it occurred to her what was the matter with her, for she had been slightly invalidish—out of her usual way. All at once her head swam, her whole being grew faint. She tottered along as well as she could till she came to one of the late cuttings in the avenue, where the great trunk of a tree was lying on the side of the path: and there she sat down to think. A great tremor came over her, a something of sweetness indescribable, something like the welling out of a fountain of joy and delight. She had never been a knowing woman or experienced in the events of life, but rather prim and old-maidish in her reserve. And she had not known or thought what might be going on: was this what it was? She sat down to think, and for half-an-hour Mary's mild spirit was, as it were in heaven. Tears, delicious tears came to her eyes—a tender awe came over her, a feeling which is one of the compensations of women for the many special troubles that they have to bear. As the one is indescribable so are the others. Mary could not for her life have put into words the emotions which filled her heart.

Presently Lord Frogmore came in sight walking briskly up the avenue, the trimmest, most active, cheerfullest of old gentlemen. He was never far off from where his wife was, liking to be near her, regarding her with an honest homely affection that had something pathetic in it. He came up to her quickening his pace. "Are you tired, Mary," he said, "or were you waiting *for me?*"

"Partly the one and partly the other," said Mary, bringing herself back to ordinary life with a little start and shock. He seated himself beside her upon the tree.

"I think, my dear," he said, "that you have been of late more easily tired than you used to be."

"Oh, no," said Mary, with a sudden flush, for she was jealous of her secret, and shy as a girl, not knowing how it ever could be put into words. She got up quickly, shaking her skirts from the dead leaves which had been lying in the crevices. "I am not in the least tired now," she said, "and it is time to get home."

"On account of little Duke?" said Lord Frogmore. "You may be sure the boy is happy enough. I think you are as fond of that boy, Mary, as if he were your own."

She had been a step in advance of him going on, but now she turned round suddenly and gave him a look—such a look. Never in all their life before had Mary's mild eyes confessed such unfathomable things. The look filled Lord Frogmore with amazement and dismay. "Mary," he said, "my dear, what is the matter? What has happened? What is wrong?"

She made him no reply; but suddenly the light went out altogether from the eyes which had turned to him so solemn and wonderful a look. And Mary did what she had never done in her life—slid down at his feet in a faint, falling upon the grass on the side of the way. It was all so quiet—so instantaneous—that poor Lord Frogmore was taken doubly unprepared. There was nothing violent even about the fall. She slipped from his side noiselessly, and lay there without a move-

ment or a cry. The old lord was for a moment terrified beyond measure, but presently perceived that it was merely a faint, and knelt down by her, taking off her bonnet, fanning her with his hat, watching till the life should come back. He had shouted for help, but Mary came to herself before any help arrived. She raised herself from the ground, the damp freshness of which had restored her, and put up her hand to her uncovered head in confusion. And then the colourless face suddenly flushed red, and she cried, "Oh, what have I been doing? I beg your pardon. I beg your pardon, Frogmore."

"Hush, my dear, you have done nothing but what is quite natural," said the old lord, who was far more experienced than Mary. "Don't hurry yourself, nor jump up in that impetuous way. Gently, gently, my love, here is some one coming. Bring round the pony carriage at once, Gregory, your mistress is tired. At once, I say."

"Oh, I can walk. There is really nothing the matter, Frogmore."

"Nothing at all, my dear," said Lord Frogmore cheerfully. "Keep quite quiet and don't disturb yourself." He sat down beside her on the grass, though he knew it was very bad for him. "Never mind the bonnet, you don't want it this pleasant day. And what pretty hair you have, Mary. It is a good thing when your bonnet falls off, it shows your pretty hair."

With such words he soothed her, with little compliments and tendernesses as if she had been a child, divining many things, and not feeling any of those inclinations to blame which younger husbands exercise

so freely. Lord Frogmore was all indulgence for the wife who was young in his eyes, so much younger than himself. He put her into the little carriage when it came, and drove her gently home with all the care of a father. Mary had quite recovered herself by this time, and had arranged her bonnet and looked herself, trim as usual, though a little pale, when Gregory came jingling back with the quiet pony and the little cart in which Mary herself drove about the park. And they had quite a cheerful drive home, though Mary's subdued tones, she who always was so quiet! and paleness were very touching to her old husband. But when they reached the hall door, where her maid and the housekeeper were both waiting, having heard that Lady Frogmore had been ill, and being both of them better instructed women than she—just as she stepped out of the carriage with her husband's help, smiling and saying it was nothing, there was a childish shout in the hall, and Duke rushing out with a bound, flung himself upon her.

"Oh, Aunt Mary, I've got something to tell you—I've got something to tell you!" cried the boy.

"Get away with you, child," said Lord Frogmore; "out of the way—out of the way. Don't you see she's ill?"

The colour that had been coming back fled out of Mary's cheeks again. Her eyes once more gave a look of anguish, straight into her husband's heart. She stopped as if struck to stone, with her foot upon the step. But she did not faint again as they feared. She put out her hand to the boy.

"He must not suffer—he must not suffer. Promise me," she said, with a shudder "that he shall not suffer, Frogmore?"

Fortunately this was said almost under her breath, so that no one could distinguish what it was except the old lord himself, who was extremely distressed and puzzled. He remained downstairs very anxious while the women attended Mary to her room. What should little Duke have to do with it? Why should he be brought in? The child hung about his uncle asking a thousand questions. What was the matter with Aunt Mary? Why did she look so pale? Was she going to bed so early before tea? What did she want with the doctor? Duke had not discrimination enough to see that he was not wanted, but when Lord Frogmore's patience broke down, and he said, sharply, "Go away, child; for goodness sake go away," Duke retired in great offence, feeling that the world was a desert, and that nothing but an abrupt return home would make it worth while to live. It was all he could do to keep himself from setting out at once on foot. He rushed out into the hall with that intention, but was checked by the sight of the butler at the door, who was still giving his instructions to the mounted groom outside. "He's to come as fast as he can, and you're to go on wherever he may have gone till you find him—a deal of fuss about nothing," the butler was saying. "My missus——," but here he broke off, seeing the puzzled face of little Duke: and the groom rode off at great speed, as if he had never lingered for a minute's gossip during all his life.

"*Is Aunt Mary* very ill?" said Duke.

"I don't think so, sir; no more than other ladies," said the experienced butler.

"Mamma's ill sometimes," said the little boy.

"They mostly is, sir," returned the other grimly.

"But she won't take nasty physic as we have to do —nurse never asks me, though I am the oldest, and the one that is of most consequence."

"You've always been the heir, my little gentleman," said the little butler, "and made a deal of fuss with; but I wouldn't say nothing on that subject if I were you now."

"Why?" said Duke, opening large eyes; but Mr. Upjames had occupied enough of his precious time with a little boy, and now turned away vouchsafing no reply.

CHAPTER XX.

LORD FROGMORE had always been cheerful, but now he was gayer than ever—for to be sure Mary soon recovered from her momentary illness which was more nerves than anything else, though she was so far from being a nervous subject. She was taken the greatest care of during that summer, and the old lord looked twenty years younger. He whistled when he went out for his walks, he had a smile and a pleasant word for everybody. He grew absolutely juvenile in his extreme satisfaction with himself and everything about him. "You'd say fifty-five at the very most to see him smirking along the road like a new-married man," said the old woman at the gates, who was just Lord Frogmore's age, and "expected" a great-grandchild in a week or two. Nothing could exceed his satisfaction and complacency. He reconciled himself to Duke by presenting the boy with a pony all to himself to take home, which had been Duke's chief earthly desire—and took him to the stables to see the "leggy" colt, which was Uncle Ralph's present, and which had grown into a tough but not lovely hunter, justifying his original owner's prophecy.

"Do you think Aunt Mary could ride this, Duke?" the old gentleman asked, with a chuckle.

"Aunt Mary!" cried the boy with a shout, "she's *frightened of Polo* when he's fresh."

"So she is," said Lord Frogmore. "I shouldn't wonder if she let you ride this one when your father takes you out with him."

"Oh, Uncle Frogmore! why, he could step over the big fence without jumping at all," cried Duke in ecstasy. The old lord was kind to the boy, kinder than he had ever been before.

Why it was that Letitia should have come herself to fetch Duke home on that occasion I have never ascertained. Perhaps it was something in the air, one of those presentiments, sympathetic or antipathetic, brain-waves as the wise call them, which suggested to Mrs. John Parke the possibility of some new turn in the aspect of affairs. She did not ask any questions or receive any definite information during her stay of three days, at least from the heads of the house, but no doubt she drew her own conclusions from the extreme cheerfulness of the old lord and the subdued but anxious conciliatory ways of Mary. Mary was always conciliatory, always anxious to make up to Letitia as for an imaginary wrong, but she had never been so anxious as now. She took advantage of a birthday in the family to send a great box full of presents in which every child in the house had a share. She was eager to know if there was anything Letitia wanted—a desire in which Mrs. Parke did not balk her, notwithstanding that it was gall and wormwood to receive anything from Mary's hands. We have all, however, a good deal of gall and wormwood to swallow in the course of our lives, and it was something to secure a solid advantage even at that cost. Letitia did not let her pride stand in the way. But to come to the Park and see *Mary in full* possession, with that old fool, as his

sister-in-law called him, smirking and smiling at her, and everybody serving her hand and foot, was hard for Letitia to endure at any time—and was doubly hard now. For all the more that she was not told anything, Mrs. Parke felt danger and destruction in the air. The care with which Mary was surrounded, the gaiety of Lord Frogmore, seemed proof positive at one moment of the failure of all her own hopes. But then she said to herself, why were they so exuberant towards Duke, petting the boy as he had never been petted before? This bewildered his mother, for she would not herself have felt any compunction in such a case. Her feelings in Mary's circumstances would have been pure triumph. Thus notwithstanding the assurance given by her maid, and all the other signs which she could not ignore, Letitia left the Park with her son, still unsatisfied. Duke was kissed and blessed and tipped more than ever when he left the Frogmores. His pony had been sent off in charge of a groom, every distinction was done to him that could have been done to the future heir. If it was all because he was no longer certain to be the heir! but that was beyond the intuitions of Mrs. John Parke. She went home in heaviness and anger but still uncertain what to believe. All that she could do was to make poor John's life very uncomfortable to him when she returned. He was cast down too as was natural. He walked up and down the room gloomily with his hands in his pockets and his shoulders thrust up to his ears as she told the story of her visit. When they were alone Mrs. Parke exercised some uncomfortable economies, though she always contrived to do her husband credit when guests were in the house. Thus

there was only one small lamp in the room and no fire though the day had been damp and cold, and John Parke did not feel disposed to warm himself as his wife did with hot cups of tea.

"Well," he said with a sigh—"there was nothing else to be expected. You might have made up your mind to that from the day they were married: I did," said John with a nod of his head, which was sunk between his shoulders as if he had been the most foreseeing philosopher in the world.

"I have not made up my mind yet," said Letitia, "for why didn't they tell me? Mary could never have kept in her triumph. And as for Frogmore, he would have been bursting with it. To be sure, Felicie—but I don't put much faith in what the maids say. And then, why should they have been so more than usually fond of Duke? No; I won't believe it," Mrs. Parke cried, "they couldn't have resisted the triumph over me."

"I tell you what," cried John, "I won't have that little brute of a pony in my stables. If Frogmore chooses to give Duke presents like that he must keep it for him. A little beast! and fit to eat as much corn as my best hunter. I can't have it here."

"John! We must not offend Frogmore."

"Oh, offend Frogmore! When you tell me we are to be cut out and disinherited and lose everything!"

"I never said that. I wouldn't say it," said Mrs. Parke, piously, "even if the worst had happened: for there's always Providence to take into account, and measles and whooping cough and that sort of thing. And it might be a girl, and a hundred things might happen—if it's anything at all, which I don't believe

myself," Letitia said, yet with a tremor at her heart. "Go away, for goodness sake, and dress," she added, with irritation; "to see you going up and down, up and down, like the villains in the theatre is more than my nerves can stand. For goodness sake go away."

"I can't take this sort of news so easily as you do," said John, with his head upon his breast.

"So easily as I do! Oh, go away, go away, and don't drive me mad with your folly," cried his wife. "Do you think it can ever be half as much to you as it is to me? To see that Mary Hill in the place that should be mine, to kiss her and pretend to be friends when I could tear her in pieces with my hands, to see your old fool of a brother, who ought to have been dead and buried——"

"Letitia, not a word against Frogmore!"

"Oh, fiddlesticks about Frogmore! as if one could have any patience with an old—— He ought to have been dead and buried long ago. No man has a right to live on for ever, and keep other people out of their rights. And to marry at that age! It ought to be punished like murder. It's as bad as murder and robbery and sacrilege and high treason all together. I can't think how you can find a word to say for him, John Parke."

"For one thing he's not seventy—as you may see in any peerage——"

"Oh, don't talk to me!" cried Letitia: and what answer could be made to that? Altogether Greenpark was on that evening a melancholy house.

Such questions cannot remain long in doubt, and *before the summer* was at all advanced Mrs. Parke was

compelled to give full credence to the terrible truth. Needless to say that in the bottom of her heart she had been certain of it all along, though she held out so stoutly and would not acknowledge it to be true. But when it became known that Mrs. Hill and Agnes had arrived at the Park for a long visit, Mrs. John had a paroxysm of almost frenzy which for a day or two kept her to her bed, where she lay devouring her soul with imaginations of what was happening. Imaginations! Did she not know as well as if she had seen them what was going on? Mrs. Hill, oh with what beaming of pleasure on her face, bustling about, putting everybody right. Agnes, like another Mary, full of importance too. The family from the vicarage altogether at the head of affairs, regulating everything, occupying the whole place, scarcely leaving room enough in his own house for poor old Frogmore, the old fool, the old ass, who had brought all this upon his family. Letitia raged within herself with internal war and wails of wrath and anguish, like a wild beast, for three days; and then she got up and announced her intention of paying a visit to the Park.

"It's only right that I should go and ask for her!" she said, with a curl of her lip over her teeth, which made this English lady look like a hyena.

"For goodness sake, Letitia, mind what you're about. Don't go and betray yourself," said her husband in alarm.

"Oh, you may leave me to take care of that," she said.

She arrived quite suddenly and unexpectedly, without a maid even, with a small travelling bag. "I felt

that I must see dear Mary once more before—— At her age one always feels a little nervous for an affair of this kind," she said sympathetically to Lord Frogmore, whose radiant countenance naturally clouded over at this remark. "I can go home to-night if there's no room for me," she added, "though I brought a bag, you see, in case I should stay."

"There must always be room for my brother John's wife in any circumstances," said the polite old lord, but he did not lead the way into the inner sanctuary until he had carried the news of this unexpected arrival. "Mrs. John Parke, my dear," he said, "is so terribly anxious about you, Mary, that she has come all this way to know how you are."

"Oh, Letitia!" cried Mary, and "Tisch!" cried Agnes, in equal consternation. They looked at each other and grew pale.

"Let me go down and speak to her. She will frighten Mary out of her wits if she comes upstairs."

"Oh, no," said Mary faintly, "she must come in. Oh, Frogmore, I can't blame her, when I think of those poor children. Perhaps she will feel a little more for me—now——"

"Feel for you! You are the happiest woman I know," said Agnes, indignant at her sister's weakness.

"She feels nothing but envy and malice and all uncharitableness," cried the old lord. "Never mind, my love. We'll do our best for the children all the same; but you won't let a woman like that interfere with your happiness, Mary?"

"N—no," said Mary doubtfully. She grew very white, *and then very* red, and cried, "Oh, let her come at

once, let me get it over," with something that was very like a cry of despair.

But there was no offence in Letitia's looks when she made her appearance. She explained again that she had brought a bag in case they could have her for the night, but otherwise that she could very well return to Greenpark the same day, for she would not for all the world upset dear Mary. Her eyes went round the room taking in everything at a glance. Oh, so like the Hills, she said to herself. Just what she would have expected of them. The big chair which was exactly Mrs. Hill, as if it had been made in imitation of her, and all the little trumpery ornaments and things, little pots of flowers and so forth. But Letitia took the chair which was like Mrs. Hill, feeling a momentary satisfaction in disturbing the habit which no doubt the vicar's wife had already formed of sitting there, and beamed upon the little party as if she were as happy in her friend's prospects as any of the family could be.

It was not until the evening that she showed the claws that were hid under all this velvet. She had been so *nice*, so exactly what a sympathetic sister-in-law should be, that Mary's mother and sister had not hesitated to leave her alone with their interesting invalid. Lord Frogmore had gone out for one of his frequent walks. The twilight was falling upon the long warm August day. It had begun to get a little dim in the room, though Mary through the open window was still watching the last evening glories in the western sky. Mary, too, had lost her fear of Letitia. It was so much more natural to think well of everyone; to believe at bottom an old friend must always be kind. And what

could be more natural between two old friends than to go back at such an hour upon the past, especially the past which had linked them so much more closely together.

"When one thinks," said Letitia with a laugh, "how strangely things come about. Do you remember, Mary, how we met in the picture-gallery? It was the Grosvenor Gallery, wasn't it? But no; they had not begun then. It must have been in the Academy, I suppose. It was just a chance, as people say, that took you and me there at the same time. You were with those old-fashioned aunts of yours. And you were very old-fashioned yourself, my dear, if I may say so now. Very neat you know—you always were neat—but your things looking as if they had all been made at home, and made a good while ago, and so well taken care of. Oh, I think I can see you now! and to think from that chance meeting how much has come!"

"Yes, indeed," said Mary, "when one thinks of it as you say——" Poor Mary's voice trembled. She gave a despairing glance towards the door. But no one came to her rescue. Mrs. Hill and Agnes were busy laying out a whole wardrobe of "things" to show to Tisch——

"Yes—when one thinks of it—what put it into my head I wonder to ask you to come to Greenpark for a long visit? I hadn't so much as thought of you for years, and all at once I saw you standing there, and the thought came into my head. If something hadn't put that into my mind how different everything might have been for both of us. You would have been just *Mary Hill, the* vicar of Grocombe's daughter, living very

poorly in that dreadful old place, and I should have been—well, looking forward sooner or later to having this nice old house, and the title and all that. Dear me, how little one knows what difference in one's life a rash word can make."

"You can't feel it more than—I do, Letitia," said Mary in very subdued and tremulous tones, pulling closer round her with her old agitated movement the lace shawl that had replaced her knitted one.

"Oh, yes," said Letitia, "I do, my dear, for I have suffered by it you know while you have benefited—that makes all the difference in the world. When I think how different things might have been had I only just said, 'How d'ye do, Mary,' and gone by. Then you would never have met Frogmore, never had it in your power to change everything, never turned against me and the poor children——"

"Letitia, oh, don't say I have turned against you. How have I turned against you? I love the children as if—as if——"

"My dear," said Letitia, "you know we needn't discuss that. You would never have turned against us I am quite sure if it hadn't been so very much to your own advantage. And nobody would expect you for a moment to have done otherwise. Think of what you've gained by it. A title. Who would have thought of a title for one of the vicar of Grocombe's daughters—and everything that heart could desire. A handsome house, two very fine places which you know Frogmore has, not to speak of the house in town which he lets, but which I'm sure you won't allow him to go on letting. And now having got everything else, you're going to have an

heir, Mary Hill—oh, I forgot, you're not Mary Hill, you're my Lady Frogmore,—an heir which is the best of all, to turn my poor boy out of his chance, out of what we all thought so sure. No, I don't want to say it—I'm amazed at myself for saying it, but I can't help it. I'm Duke's mother, and I can't— I can't but think of my boy."

"Oh, Letitia!" said Mary, piteously, holding out her hands in an agonized appeal.

"Oh, I don't blame you," cried Letitia, "how could you be supposed not to think of your own advantage. What am I to you? What are we to you that you shouldn't think of yourself first? Oh, of course you thought of yourself first. It would have been quite unnatural if you hadn't done so. But I can't help dwelling on it, Mary, with little Duke upon my mind, and thinking what we must do with him, and that he must be brought up to get his own living now. I can't help thinking if I had just said, 'How d'ye do, Mary,' that day—if I had taken no more notice and never thought, 'Well, they're very poor at the vicarage, and one person's living would never be missed in our house, and that it might be such a thing for you.' Oh, if I hadn't been so silly, how different everything might have been. I don't blame you; not the least in the world; for of course you thought first of what was to your own advantage. But I do blame myself! Oh, I do blame myself. If it hadn't been for that you would never have seen Lord Frogmore, and how different everything would have been."

"Oh, Letitia!" cried Mary, as she had done at *intervals all through* this long address. The tears were

pouring down her cheeks. Sometimes she hid her face in her hands; sometimes raised it to give her tormentor an appealing look, a protest against this cruelty. "Oh, Letitia, Letitia, spare me. It is not my fault. I never thought—I never believed—I would rather have died than injure you or the children. It made me ill when I first knew, to think of little Duke. Oh, Letitia, I think my heart will break!"

"Oh, my dear," said Letitia, "I know all about hearts breaking. It never stops you from having your own way. What is the use of saying you would rather die? Would you rather die with all the good things in life before you? Nonsense, Mary! Don't talk to me as if I didn't know all about it. Now you'll be petted and fêted and made as if there never was the like before. You and your baby—while my poor Duke, my Duke, that was the real, rightful heir——"

Mrs. John burst forth in sobs and tears, and the room grew darker and darker. Mary, huddled up in a corner of the sofa, heard and saw no more.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE baby was born next morning, after a night which was terrible for all the household in the Park. Mrs. John left hurriedly after she had called the attendants to Mary, who, she said, did not seem well. She got the brougham to drive her to the station, saying that she would not stay to add to the trouble of the house at such a moment, but begging the butler to send her a telegram as soon as there was any news to tell, "which will not be long," she said. I think she did feel a little guilty as she drove away. It was, one might say, Letitia's first crime. She had done many things that were very doubtful, and she had not been very regardful of her neighbour generally, nor loved him as herself. Yet she had never addressed herself to a fellow-creature with an absolute and distinct intention to do harm before. And she was not comfortable. She tried to reassure herself that she had spoken nothing but the truth, and that they deserved nothing better at her hands, but still she was not easy in her mind. She could not get out of her eyes the sight of Mary huddled up in her corner, with nothing but a gasping breath to show that she was alive—nor could she help asking herself what might be happening as she herself hurried through the softly-*falling night*, getting away as fast as she could from the

house in which that drama of life or death was going on. She had heard the scream Agnes gave as she went in with her candle. In the urgency of attending to Lady Frogmore no one noticed Mrs. John running so hastily downstairs. Nobody, she said to herself, would think of identifying her with it whatever happened. And nothing would happen. Oh no, no. No such chance. They had constitutions of iron, all those Hills. And why should it harm Mary or any one to hear what was the simple truth?

It was a dreadful night at the Park. The old lord wandered up and down like an unquiet spirit unable to rest. Rogers, who was more shocked than words could say by an exhibition of feeling which went against all the laws of health, endeavored in vain to get him to go to bed. "For you can do no good, my lord—none of us can do any good. Things will take their course, and the medical man is here. My lady would be most distressed of all if she knew that you were losing your night's sleep which is the most important thing, more important even than food. I do entreat your lordship to go to bed. I'll sit up and bring the first news—the very first, if you'll go to bed, my lord."

"It is easy speaking," said Lord Frogmore—"you're a good fellow, Rogers. Go to bed yourself. It's my turn to sit up to-night."

"But it don't affect me—and it will affect your lordship—and what will my lady say to me when she knows?"

"Oh don't speak to me," cried the old lord with the water in his eyes. "I'll give you a sovereign for every

word she says to you, when she's able to take any notice, Rogers, either of you or me."

"That'll be to-morrow, my lord," said the man, "and I know her ladyship will never put faith in me again. But at least you'll take your beef-tea."

Lord Frogmore pushed him away, and bade him take the beef-tea himself and coddle himself up as he had done his master so long. As for himself, he kept trotting up and downstairs all the night. It was far too late at sixty-eight, after taking such care of himself, to begin this life of emotion and anxiety; and the morning light, when it stole in through all the closed shutters, flouting the candles, and poured down the great staircase, making the lamp in the hall look so foolish, made sad game of the old lord's rosy face, generally so fresh and smooth. But, happily, ease came with the morning, and the best of news: a boy—and all very quiet, and every prospect that everything would go well. Lord Frogmore was allowed to peep at the top of a small head done up in flannel, and at the mother's pale face on the pillow, and then he resigned himself to Rogers to be put to bed. But he was now so overflowing with delight that he chattered like an old woman to his faithful servant. "Rogers," he said, "you've heard it's a boy?"

"Yes, my lord, and I wish you every happiness in him," Rogers said.

"I am afraid my wife will be disappointed," said Lord Frogmore, "she's so fond of my little nephew, little Duke. She would rather it had been a girl for that. Poor little Duke! Now he's quite out of it, the little *shaver.*" And Lord Frogmore laughed. He was sorry

for Duke, or at least would have been had there been room in him for anything but joy. "Did I ever tell you, Rogers, what that little fellow said the first time I went to Greenpark, eh? He said, 'When you're dead papa will be Lord Frogmore, and when papa's dead me.' Poor little shaver! He was too cocksure," said Lord Frogmore again with a triumphant laugh.

"It'll make a deal of difference to him, my lord."

"Yes, it'll make a deal of difference. But they couldn't expect me to consider them before myself," said Lord Frogmore. "A man likes to have an heir of his own, Rogers—a son of his own to come after him."

"Yes, he do, my lord," Rogers said.

"A man loves to have an heir of his own," repeated the old lord with a beaming face—"his own flesh and blood—his own son to sit in his place. That's what a man prefers before everything, Rogers."

"He do, my lord," Rogers once more replied.

"You put up with it when you can't help it; but a son of your own to come after you, Rogers!"

"Yes, my lord—if you'll drink this while it is hot, and get into bed."

"You're a sad martinet, Rogers. I don't believe you mind a bit, or care, whether it was a girl or a boy. I'll have no beef-tea. I'll have some champagne to drink to the heir."

"Oh, my lord, my lord! You'll have one of your attacks: and then what will her ladyship say to me?" said the much-troubled Rogers, to whom his old master was generally so obedient.

It was enough to drive a man who had the respon-

sibility, whom everybody looked to, out of his mind! At last, however, the old lord was got to bed, and after his exhausting night had a long and sound sleep.

But before Lord Frogmore awoke agitating rumours had already begun to run through the house. Nobody quite knew what it was; but it began to be rumored that her ladyship was not doing so well as was expected, that she was in a bad way. Whether it was fever or what it was nobody could tell. A consciousness of such a fact will breathe through a house or even a country without either details or certainty. The doctor's face, as he came downstairs, his lingering after it was clear he was no longer wanted, an exclamation, surprised from the lips of one of the ladies or even a gravity in the aspect of the nurse, to whom a curious housemaid had handed in something that was wanted, each supported and strengthened the other. Not so well as might be expected. When Lord Frogmore awoke it was afternoon, for he had slept long in the satisfaction of his soul and the calming of his fears, and he saw a revelation in the face of Rogers when questioned how my lady was. Rogers lied with his lips, or at least he brought forth with a little difficulty the usual words; but Lord Frogmore could not be deceived by his face. The old gentleman rose with a sudden chill at his heart and dressed hurriedly and hastened to his wife's room, where he could see they were reluctant to admit him. Mary was lying with a clouded countenance, not like herself, not asleep as they said at first, but muttering to herself, and the faces of her sister and the nurse *who* were watching by her were very anxious. "She *wants something*. What is it she wants?" said the old

lord, anxiously. The experienced nurse shook her head with an ominous gravity, and begged that the poor lady might not be disturbed. "They are like that, sometimes," she said, "till they get a good sleep."

"But what is it? What is it she wants? Get her what she wants," said Lord Frogmore, going to the side of the bed. Mary saw him, for she moved a little and raised her voice. "It is a girl—it is a girl—say it is a girl. Say—say it is a girl!" She looked at him with a piteous appeal that broke his heart. Ah no, she did not know him. She appealed to him as some one new, as one who could satisfy her. "It is a girl—you know —you know it is a girl!" she cried.

The heart of the poor old lord swelled to bursting. This was all as new to him as if he had been a boy-husband, disturbed, yet so joyful and proud. "No, Mary," he said; "no, my dear. It's a beautiful boy. The thing I desired most in the world: it's the heir."

Mary gave a shriek that rang through all the house. She got up in her bed, her face convulsed with horror and terror. "No, no," she cried; "no, no, no. The heir—not the heir—not the heir. Oh, take it away. Didn't you hear what she said: It will grow up an idiot and kill us. Take it away—take it away."

"Mary!" cried the old lord, taking her hand, "Mary! This is that wretched woman's doing that has frightened her. Mary, my love, it is your own child; a beautiful child. Our son, the boy I wanted, Mary."

Mary snatched her hand from his. She shrank away from him to the other edge of the bed. "No, not a boy—no, no, no!—no heir!—there is an heir," she cried, clutching at the woman who stood on the other

side, as if escaping from a danger. "He doesn't know —he doesn't know," she cried, flinging herself upon the nurse. "It will grow up an idiot and kill us. Do you hear? Do you hear? Say it's not so—oh, say it's not so!"

"No, no, my poor dear lady, no, no! It's as you wish, it'll be all you wish," said the nurse holding the patient in her arms. And Mary clung to the woman holding her fast, whispering in her ear. Lord Frogmore stood with piteous eyes and saw his wife shrinking from him, talking to the woman, who bent over her, with the dreadful whisper of insanity, which meant nothing. Was this what it had come to—all the pride and triumph and joy? The old lord stood with his limbs trembling under him, his old heart sore with disappointment and cold with terror. His mild Mary! What had changed her in a moment in the midst of happiness to this frenzied sufferer? When he saw that she kept hiding her head in the nurse's breast, clinging to her, he withdrew sorrowful and subdued to where Agnes sat by the fire with the little bundle of flannel on her lap. She was crying quietly under her breath, and looked up at him as he came towards her with sympathetic trouble. "They say," she whispered, "that it's often so just at first when they want sleep. Oh, don't lose heart!"

"It's that accursed woman," he said, under his breath.

"Oh I hope not—I hope it's only—she will be better when she has slept. Look at him, poor little darling," said Agnes unfolding the shawls. Lord Frogmore cast a troubled glance at the poor little heir who

seemed about to cost him so dear. He had no heart to look at the child. He crept out of the room afterwards feeling all his years and his unfitness, a man near seventy, for the cares and responsibilities of a father. A father for the first time in his sixty-eighth year. And Mary, Mary! So soon was triumph changed to terror and woe.

The doctor gave him a little comfort when he came. He said that such cases were not very rare. So great a shock and ordeal to go through acted on delicate nerves and organization with a force they were unable to withstand, and sometimes the mind was pushed off its balance. There would be nothing to be alarmed about if this state should continue for a week or two or even more. It was not very uncommon. The doctor had various instances on his tongue as glib as if they had been a list of patronesses at a ball. Nothing to be afraid of! It would pass away he declared and leave no sign. As for the interview with Mrs. John, he did not think that had anything to do with it; there was quite enough to account for it without that. He thought it best that Lord Frogmore should keep out of the way, not to distress himself with so melancholy a sight. Yes, it was distressing and melancholy: but soon it would pass over, and be like a dream. The old lord was comforted by this consolatory opinion, for the first hour very much so, hoping, as he was told to hope, that in a few days all that alarmed him might be over, and his wife restored to him. But he was less confident at night, and still less confident next day. Indeed he wanted constant assurance that everything would soon be well. He flagged almost immediately after the new hope had

been formed in him, as every day he stole into his wife's room, and every day came downstairs again with the horrible conviction that there was no improvement. Poor Mary! her very face seemed changed; it was haggard and drawn, and her eyes so wistful and so watchful, shone upon him like stars, not of hope but of misery. Oh, the terror in them, and the watchfulness! For some days she was afraid of him, and turned to the nurse from him, as if to hide herself from his look. But by-and-bye she became quiet, supporting his presence, though keeping always a watchful eye upon him; supporting him and enduring his presence. Oh, what a thing to say of Mary, his gentle wife, his happy companion. The heart of the old lord sank lower and lower as those dreadful days went by.

CHAPTER XXII.

To describe the state of the Park under the effect of this event would be very difficult. It changed altogether in the most curious way. Indeed Lord Frogmore's country seat had gone through several transformations of late. Nothing could have been more composed, more orderly and perfect than it had been under the sway of Mr. Rogers and Mr. Upjames, the respectable valet and butler who had organized the life of the bachelor lord into an elegant comfort and tranquillity which was beyond praise. Everything had gone upon velvet in those halcyon days; not a sound had ever been heard to disturb the calm, save the sound of conversation among the well-chosen visitors or of a cheerful fire burning, a thing which could not be reduced to absolute subjection. There had never been any hitch in the arrangements; not even a crumpled rose-leaf on a couch. The servants moved about like polite ghosts, noiselessly warding off every annoyance. It had been a model of a luxurious home. Then there had come a strange modification when the bride was brought home, and the entire dwelling had recognized her presence with mingled distrust and affection and pride. The flutter of women's dresses about the place and women's voices had been at first difficult for the old servants to bear,

who had always hitherto kept the women strictly in their proper places, there being no housekeeper—for Mr. Upjames was more than equal to that office—and only a meek cook to make any division of authority. Rogers and Upjames had, however, on the whole taken kindly to Lady Frogmore, who did not attempt to make any fundamental changes, and who always was exceedingly civil, and not jealous of their authority; and they were elated to think that their old lord at sixty-seven was equal to taking upon him all the responsibilities of life as if he had been thirty. The mild time of Mary's reign had therefore only added a little brightness, a little ornament, a gentle gaiety to the well-ordered house. Rogers himself had grown younger, and Mr. Upjames added a grace to his perfect manner. The butler had been heard to acknowledge before that he did not feel equal to tackling the ladies, but he made no such acknowledgment now. Lady Frogmore reconciled them to the feminine sex, and the Park gained a certain consequence and liberality and light. It was not so completely centred in the task of making exquisite the comfort of its own master. It began to have thoughts of other people and other things.

But now! The house became at a touch the saddest house. All the great sitting-rooms lay empty, like a sort of vestibule to the rooms upstairs in which trouble and sorrow dwelt. Lord Frogmore came and went with a troubled face. His marriage had not changed his habits much. He had taken all the old precautions to keep in perfect health. His beef-tea and his baths, and *the certain* amount of walking which was necessary *every day, and* all his other sanitary regulations, had

been fully observed as before. But now he cared nothing for any of these things. He walked about all day, going out in the morning after breakfast, and wandering aimlessly about, instead of his habitual brisk constitutional. But when he came in, instead of going to the library to write his letters or read his papers, all that he did was to walk upstairs to the door of his wife's room to see if there was any change. He came in always with a little hope for the first few weeks, confidently expecting each time he asked the question to hear that she was better. But after that his countenance changed. He became very grave, scarcely smiling, seldom speaking to any one. Every time he came in he went upstairs with the same question; but there was something spiritless in his look, in his step, in his aspect generally, which made you feel that he had given up expecting a good reply. And when the poor little baby, who was the cause of all this trouble, was brought out to take the air and walked about in its nurse's arms up and down the avenue, the old lord would walk up and down too, accompanying the group with a look of such melancholy in his face as was like to break the spectator's heart. The baby it was allowed on all hands was very delicate. The flannel shawls, so soft and white and fine, were scarcely opened a little from its tiny face to let in the sunny atmosphere, and with never a smile on his thin old countenance, the father would walk beside it up and down, up and down. Poor little thing! and poor old gentleman! they were at the opposite extremities of human feebleness, and the fully matured life which should have linked them together was not with them. Lord Frogmore did not look much at his

little boy. He was afraid of the child lest something should happen to it. It was to him rather a part of the substantial nurse who carried it, and in whose powerful arms it was safer than anything belonging to him. And yet he walked by its side with his brisk step subdued, his head cast down, a melancholy languor about him. The starch seemed to have gone out of his collar, his cheek so rosy and firm had grown limp. To see him turning up and down, up and down by the side of that infant was enough to break anyone's heart.

Meanwhile to poor Mary there came but little change. She did not recover as the doctor had promised. She had nothing that could be called a recovery at all. She kept her bed because apparently she had no desire to get up. And sometimes she would hold long conversations about baby clothes and the like with the nurse, rationally enough, as if her mind was able to occupy itself with ordinary duties. Sometimes even she would allow the baby to be brought to her, and cry over it. "Poor little thing!" she would say, "if that is to be its fate; oh, it is not the little thing's fault. I might be to blame, but it couldn't be to blame. Oh, poor little thing! I'll not cry out if you kill me, poor baby. It will not be you, but dreadful, dreadful fate."

"Oh, my lady, don't talk like that. The child will grow up to be your comfort and joy."

"Listen then," said Mary, "it's only to you I will tell the secret," and she would put her lips to the woman's ear and whisper that eager, anxious, busy whisper that meant nothing. And when this secret communication was completed, Mary added in her ordinary voice, "So *you see we cannot* help it, neither he nor I. Oh to

think he should have been born only for this, and to put everything wrong. Take it away, take it away," she would cry suddenly, her voice rising to a scream, thrusting the poor child into her sister's arms. And then she would draw the nurse to her and whisper again. "Tell him, tell him," she said: but the whisper was never intelligible, and the look which the poor old lord gave her made the unfortunate nurse lose her head altogether. "Oh, my lord!" the woman said, and Mary nodded her head with satisfaction as if everything was being explained. Lord Frogmore would turn away more wretched than ever, unable to elicit a word or hardly a look which reminded him of her former self, and went downstairs to pace up and down the library, up and down, paying no attention to anything. Never was there a more sad house. Agnes, who remained with her sister, though Mary took no notice of her, would steal down after those dreadful interviews to comfort the poor old gentleman. "She will not speak to me at all," said Agnes, weeping. "She thinks I am a stranger. I don't think she knows me."

"What is she always whispering?" said the old lord. "There must be something in that. The nurse ought to make out what it is. Perhaps she wants something. Perhaps we might find some way to work if we could but know what that whisper was? I don't think you should stand upon a point of honour, but try—try to understand what she says."

"Oh, dear Lord Frogmore," cried Agnes with tears in her eyes. "It is nothing. I don't think she says words at all."

Lord Frogmore in his trouble ignored this speech.

"You should not be punctilious," he said, walking about the long room with short agitated steps. "It may be a matter of life and death. You should not stand upon a point of honour. You should make every effort to understand what your dear sister says."

And it was by a sort of pitiful understanding between them that Agnes said no more. He knew as well as she did that poor Mary's whispered communications were unintelligible—but he would not allow it to be said. He preferred to blame someone for an exaggerated point of honour in not listening, not understanding. Such voluntary miscomprehensions are among the most piteous subterfuges of despair.

It cannot be supposed that Mary's condition and the sad change in the house could be long ignored by Letitia, whose every faculty was on the alert to know what, if anything, had followed her last dreadful attempt against the unfortunate mother of the heir. Letitia was as yet inexperienced in what may be called crime. She had never, as has been said, knowingly assailed the life or reason of a fellow creature before—and she had not had any certainty that her attempt would be successful. It was not exactly like a knife or a revolver. Letitia was very well aware that such operations as she had carried out upon Mary would not in the least have affected herself—and, therefore, she felt herself justified in ignoring the possibility of serious harm. But when the news was brought to her, whispered with bated breath, that Lady Frogmore's mind was affected—indeed, that she was mad which was the succinct way of stating the matter—Letitia was so much startled and horrified that she cried—which did her great good with

her husband. John had been uneasy at the vehemence of his wife's hatred of Mary in her new exaltation, and when he saw her suddenly burst into most real tears, his good heart was touched and he felt that he had been doing her injustice. He got up from his seat in his compunction and went to his wife and caressed and soothed her. "You must go over and inquire, Letitia," he said. And once more Letitia was so moved by genuine horror, that, anxious though she was to know everything, she held back from doing this.

"Oh, John," she said, "I did perhaps say something that was too strong when I knew what her schemings had come to. They might not like me to go."

"I have always told you, Letitia, I did not think there was any scheming about it. But anyhow Frogmore would be pleased—he would see that we bear no malice. Of course, I felt it at the first just as you did," said the unconscious John.

"The child," said Letitia, "is very delicate, too." She could not help stealing a glance at John under her eyelids to see whether he would respond.

"Poor people!" said John, "or rather poor old Frogmore, to put off so long and then have such a sad time of it. I'm very sorry for the poor old fellow."

"He had no right to do anything of the kind," Letitia cried.

"Well, it was hard upon us," said John with a sigh: "but I've made up my mind to it now. You had better go over to-morrow and ask how she is."

Letitia was very eager to go, to see with her own eyes what was the condition of affairs: but yet it was

not without difficulty that she persuaded herself to return to the house where her last visit had been so disastrous. It was now September, and the days were beginning to get short, but this time she took no bag, nor had she the least intention of staying over the night. An hour would be enough, she thought, to hear all she wanted and see what she could. But her sense of guilt would not be subdued as she approached the house and remembered how she had fled away from it six weeks before, having done all the harm that it was possible to do. She had no intention now of doing any harm; oh, no, no! only to inquire and if practicable see for herself what prospect of sanity there was for Mary or life for her boy. When she met, in her progress up the avenue in the fly she had hired at the station, the little pathetic group above described, the nurse carrying the infant and Lord Frogmore marching melancholy at its side, she hurriedly stopped and sprang out, feeling that Lord Frogmore was likely to be more easily dealt with than Agnes, whose feminine instincts would divine her object. But Letitia did not find that a very gracious reception awaited her. Lord Frogmore looked up with a little irritation as the cab drew up. He evidently thought a visitor an impertinence. When he was compelled by his sister-in-law's eager and excessively affectionate accost to stop in his walk and speak to her, a gleam of angry light came into his eyes. "Oh, it is you, Mrs. John!" he said.

"Oh, Frogmore," cried the lady, "how is Mary? I could not rest when I heard how ill she was till I had come over to see for myself."

"*I do not* know," said Lord Frogmore stiffly, "how

ill you may have heard she was: but I don't wonder that you should wish to see for yourself."

"No: can you wonder? We have been like sisters almost all our lives."

Though Letitia quaked at the old lord's tone, she felt that it was the wisest way to ignore all offence.

"Sisters, if all tales are true, are not always the best of friends," said Lord Frogmore. "Familiarity interferes with the natural bounds of good breeding. I think, Mrs. John, that I must ask you not to go any further, or at least not to insist on seeing Lady Frogmore."

"Is she so very bad?" said Letitia in a thrilling whisper.

"No," he said with irritation. "I did not say she was very bad. I said I could not admit visitors who, perhaps, might forget what is due to a delicate and sensitive woman."

"I did not know," said Letitia with an injured air, "that I was so little worthy of confidence. I am very sorry that Mary is so ill; so is John. We both felt we could not rest without knowing personally how much or how little of what we hear is true."

"And what do you hear?" Lord Frogmore, though he felt it his duty to defend his wife, was not willingly ungracious, and felt it of all things in the world the most difficult to shut his door in anyone's face. His courage failed him when Letitia put forth so reasonable a plea—

"Oh, Frogmore," said Mrs. John, "what is the use

of questioning and cross-questioning? Tell me how dear Mary is; that is all I want to know."

He was shaken in his resolution, but still tried to be stern. "What did you say to her," he asked, "the last time you were here?"

"What did I say to her? Oh, a hundred things! and she to me. We talked of how wonderful it was, and how much may come from the smallest event; that if I had not one day met her in the Academy, and asked her to come and stay with me, you might never have met her, and all that has happened would never have been. That was the last thing we talked of. Is it supposed it did any harm, that talk between Mary and me? Oh, Lord Frogmore, people must be malignant indeed if they can find any harm in that."

"I don't know that there was any harm in it. It depends upon how a thing is said, whether there is harm in it or not."

"I know," said Letitia, "that I have enemies in this house. I know Mrs. Hill and Agnes. Oh, Agnes is spiteful! She never wishes to see Mary with me. She thinks I put her against them; as if I would ever interfere between a woman and her own family. But, Frogmore, you know what women are. They are jealous; they are spiteful; they never lose an opportunity to whisper against one that has done better than themselves. I know very well what it is that turns you against me. It is Agnes Hill that has put things into your head."

"No," he said, but doubtfully, feeling that to think *so badly of* his brother's wife was very inconvenient,

and that perhaps after all it was Agnes who had put it into his head: she had not said much, but it might be she who had suggested it, for it was according to all the tenets with which he was acquainted that a woman should be spiteful, as Letitia said. He hesitated a great deal as to what he should do; whether he should hold by his first resolution to allow Letitia to come no further; or whether it might perhaps be an awakening thing for Mary to see her. Letitia followed him with soft and noiseless steps while he pursued this thought, and then she said suddenly, as if she could contain herself no longer, "Surely, at least, there can be no reason why I should not see the dear child."

She took the baby out of the nurse's arms as she spoke, and deftly, with practised hands, folded down the coverings in which it was wrapped. The mother of five children knew how to handle with ease and mastery, which made the old lord wonder and tremble, the little fragile new-born baby, which to him was an object so wonderful.

"If I were you," said Letitia to the nurse, "I would not have the child covered up so. The air will do him nothing but good. Throw off all your shawls, and let him breathe the good air. I am sure his mother would say so if she were here."

Letitia, at least in that action, meant no harm to the child. She said it as she would have done to any ignorant cottager who half smothered her baby to keep it from cold. But while she held the infant in her arms, and put down her cheek upon its little dark, downy head, an impulse that was horrible came over her. Oh, the little interloper!—the child so undesired,

so unnecessary—who had taken her children's inheritance from them! To think that a little pressure more than usual, a little more close folding of the shawls, and it would stand in Duke's way no more. The thought made her strain towards her with a sudden throb of almost savage excitement the little helpless atom, who could never tell any tale.

CHAPTER XXIII.

MARY was lying as usual in bed, much shrunken from the Mary we knew, her mild countenance clouded with that haze of trouble which seems to come with any disturbance of the mind. There was no reason that she should lie in bed except that prostration of will and feeling which came from a disordered brain. It troubled her to move at all, to raise her head, to use her hand, except in moments of spasmodic energy, when she would spring up in bed, and a stream of wild and terrified life would seem to flow in her veins. Terror was always a chief part of her energy, a desire to fly, to hide herself, to avoid some terrible, ever-menacing danger. On this morning she had been very quiet. For about an hour her sister had been seated by the bedside holding her hand, talking to her about common things; and Mary, when she had replied at all, had replied, Agnes thought, with so much sense and calmness that her heart was quite light. "She is a great deal better, nurse. Don't you think she is a great deal better this morning?" Miss Hill had said. The nurse shook her head, standing on the other side of the bed, but made with her lips a reassuring reply. And peace was in the room where perhaps, the anxious watchers thought, excitement and danger were passing over, and all might be beginning to be well.

Suddenly there were voices heard coming up the stairs, approaching the room, a faint little wail from the baby, a soothing hush-sh from the nurse who carried him. And then another voice—not loud, not ungentle, the voice of a woman trying to ingratiate herself with someone who accompanied her. Mary had started at the sound of the infant's cry, but when she heard the other voice she rose up in her bed and put out a terrified hand on each side to her nurse and to Agnes. An anguished look of listening came into her face. She clutched their hands, drawing them in close to her, her eyes staring like those of a hunted creature straight before her, as if prepared to rise and flee. Then Letitia's voice became audible again, "I will just go in. It will rouse her to see me." Both the watchers heard these words distinctly, though they would have sworn that the wild shriek which ran through the house burst from Mary's lips before they were half said. Mary flung herself first on one then on the other with cries that succeeded each other wildly, then she threw herself back into her bed, pulling the coverings over her head. "Save me! save me!" she cried, "Oh, save me, save me!" The force of her hold was such that the women on either side were forced upon the bed, their heads meeting across her concealed and covered head, from which shrieks muffled but terrible still continued to come. "For God's sake, don't bring her in, don't bring her in," cried Agnes, almost as wildly. The group outside paused terrified; Letitia was livid with fear. She turned back hastily, as if the mad creature who feared *her* was at her heels, and without saying a word ran *downstairs*. She had courage enough on ordinary occa-

sions, but to be within reach of a madwoman, which was the unmitigated phrase she used to herself, was not one of the dangers which she could face. She ran as fast as her legs would carry her down the long staircase. No plea for Mary did Mrs. Parke make. Through the ringing of those shrieks, which became more and more hoarse as the unfortunate patient wore herself out, all the bystanders heard the patter of quick little steps running downstairs. She darted out at the open door, and ran along the terrace outside, a self-condemned fugitive: or was she only a nervous woman, terrified, as some people are, of anything that sounds like insanity? The unhappy family heard in their imaginations Letitia's steps running through everything all the dreadful hours that followed. But the fact was that she ran in her panic to where she had left her cab, never drawing her breath, and got into it and drove quickly away. For one thing she had found out all she wanted to know.

What followed on that dreadful day no one ever knew clearly. Poor Mary, out of her brooding and miserable madness, which yet everybody hoped might in time have dispersed, as the shock and horror that produced it died away from her brain, became for a time acutely, terribly mad, striving to hide herself from the light of day, haunted by a horror of her enemy, who was forever pursuing her, ready to clutch her, at the door. Her confused brain caught this one point of reality and never relinquished it. Letitia was always at the door to Mary's terrified and distorted fancy. Her voice was always there, saying, "I will go in." Every time the door opened there was a fresh access of the wildest terror, which lasted through days and nights, so

dreadful to the watchers, that they could not tell how long it lasted or how often the long day ended in a night full of alarm and terror. Poor old Lord Frogmore —such a picture of an old gentleman! so active, so brisk, so well, doing everything that younger men could do—fell into pathetic ruin, lost his colour, his strength, his spirits, and became an old man in that week of misery. The old vicar from Grocombe and his wife, who came hurrying to the Park, with the idea that the near relations should always be collected on such an emergency, added to the trouble by their unnecessary presence; for Mrs. Hill, who was not to be kept out of her daughter's room, had to be removed from it periodically in a state of utter prostration, from which it required all the care of Agnes to restore her: and the vicar himself stood about in the hall or the library staring at everybody who went and came; asking in a hoarse whisper, "Is she any better?" and always in the way.

When this terrible state of affairs had lasted for a week, and everyone was worn out, the doctors—for they were now many, Lord Frogmore having summoned everyone who could be supposed to be of any help—requested an interview with him; and then announced their opinion that Lady Frogmore should be removed from home. Having thus to renounce the hopes he had still been cherishing against hope that her illness might still prove only temporary, the old lord struggled for some time against the dreadful necessity. He declared that he was ready to fill the house with attendants; to undergo any expense; to give up his house entirely to his wife and go away himself if they considered it necessary. But by and by calmer counsels prevailed. Mary's

family were more reasonable than her husband. They pointed out to him with much practical sense that he was risking his own health, destroying his own life, without any advantage to her, and that his life was more than ever valuable, for his child's sake, and even for her sake, poor forlorn lady, who had no protector but him. It was hard for him in his weakened state to stand out against the doctors, against the dull persistency of the vicar, who besides could not be got rid of till poor Mary was removed, and against what was more than all, the dreadful sight of Mary convulsed with frenzy, or lying in her calm intervals like a dead thing, her mild face grown into a tragic mask of misery. On the whole it was better not to see that, to have the knowledge of it without having one's heart rent every day by the dreadful, dreadful sight. Lord Frogmore at last consented to this miserable yet inevitable step, which he felt to be a public proclamation of the wretchedness which had so soon closed over the late and tranquil happiness of his old age. He went away for a few days with Rogers, as sad an old man as any under the stars, and gave himself up meekly into his faithful servant's hands, to be brought back to life as far as was possible. "Yes," he said, "Rogers, do what you can for me: for I have my little boy to look after, my poor little baby—that ought to have been my grandchild, Rogers."

"Don't say so, my lord. Oh, don't say so. He'll grow up to be a comfort to you."

The old lord shook his head with a melancholy smile. "He's cost me dear, he's cost me very dear, and he's a delicate little mite with no stamina, an old man's

child. Poor little beggar that has cost his mother her reason! it would be the best thing for him, Rogers, to die comfortably and be buried with her when I go."

"Oh, my lord! please God you'll live to see him come of age, and my lady as bright as ever, and all well."

Lord Frogmore gave a deep sigh, and then a little laugh, which was perhaps the saddest of the two. "Well," he said, "let's hope so, Rogers, since nobody can tell how it may be."

He could not help wondering sometimes what he had done that this should have fallen upon him in his old age, or if he had done anything, or if God worked no miracles now save in sustaining and supporting the human spirit to bear, but let the laws of nature take their course. It was Mary's nature, he felt, to be thus driven frantic by the thought of having wronged another for her own happiness, and in his sad musings he followed all the course of the story which he himself, without perhaps sufficient motive, had set in motion. He said to himself that perhaps after permitting John to believe himself to be the heir for so long, it was wrong on his part to have put himself in the position of supplanting John. He thought of his first visit to Greenpark, and wondered whether he had been so petty as to be nettled by little Duke's baby swagger. He had been nettled by it. "When you are dead, papa, and when papa is dead, me——." The child had cleared both John and himself out of his little path with such ease as if it did not matter! He had been vexed—he

a man who ought to have known better—by what the child had said: and was it possible that a little prick of offence like this should have originated all that followed? And then he thought of Mary, his Mary, so patient and sweet, putting up with everything, and with the insolence of the servants, from which he had delivered her. No, no, he could not think he had been anything but right in interfering to save Mary, to raise her above all her tormentors. He had been certainly right to do that—certainly right! But had it been better for her that he did so? Would not even Letitia's dependent, simply loving and serving Letitia's children, humble enough and poor enough, but reaping the fruits of patience in a gentle life, which was all sacrifice—would not she have been happier like that without rising to triumph (which was out of accordance with her nature) for a time, to be plunged afterwards into such horrible depths? Poor Lord Frogmore, when he had sounded all these depths, was obliged at the end to come back, and to acknowledge that he knew nothing—nothing! Perhaps he had not even done sincerely what he hoped would be for the best, being moved by wrath against little Duke and pity for Mary beyond what was reasonable, and so having set all those dreadful agencies in motion which could not be balked, which must proceed to their natural end. He lost himself in the metaphysics of this question which was so difficult to fathom. For his brother John and his brother's family had a perfect right to think themselves the heirs, and it was hard, very hard upon them to be displaced. And at the same time he himself had a perfect right to marry, and

have an heir of his own. Who can decide such questions? and yet one way or another there must have been a harvest of trouble and pain.

When Lord Frogmore returned to the park, Mary was gone. She was gone and all trace of her, except the poor little delicate baby, the puny thing which had no stamina and which everybody thought would die. Poor little thing, people said, it would be a comfort if it was to die, for it never could have any health to make life pleasant, and madness in the mother's family and the father so old, so that it was not possible he could live to see it grow up. Everybody allowed that it was a most pathetic thing to see the old lord walking in the avenue through all the winter mornings up and down, up and down in the sunshine, beside the bundle of white cashmere which contained this little weakly bud of humanity, the little thing who had not even the honours of his sex, but was called "it" by all who spoke of him. It was a very still little thing, rarely cried, but often when the veil was drawn aside from its face was seen to be gazing up at the heavens with two solemn brown eyes. Kind women cried when they saw this forlorn little creature, worse than motherless, looking up "to where it had come from," some said—"to where it was going fast," said the others. According as they were of hopeful dispositions or not people took these different views; but all thought it was a most pathetic thing to see old Lord Frogmore taking these silent walks along with his heir.

After a time, when it was seen that difficulties were apt to arise with the child's attendants, some of whom

were too kind to him, and some not kind enough, Agnes Hill left Grocombe and came to live at the Park. It was not concealed that she came chiefly to act as head nurse to the boy. But Agnes did not interfere with the father's supervision of his child, nor with their walks, for if she were not so emotional or so interesting as her sister Mary, she was very sensible and capable of letting well alone, which is a thing that few persons can do in a masterly way, and women especially are often deficient in. And thus life went on for five or six years. Five or six years! A frightful time, if you will think of it, for a poor woman to to be shut up in an asylum, and to know nothing of the fate of her nearest and dearest. To be sure she was visited periodically, and sometimes knew her friends, and would ask them questions which showed she remembered. But, however long the years may be they come only day by day, and this makes them so much more easy to get through—and human nature is the strangest thing, falling into any routine, adapting itself to all circumstances.

Life at the Park fell into this channel and went on quite peaceful, even not unhappily, strange as it may seem. Lord Frogmore recovered his health under the constant ministrations of Rogers. He had an excellent constitution: his cheeks got back their rosy hue and became firm and round again; his step recovered its elasticity. He was again pointed out to everybody as the most wonderful old gentleman of his age in the whole county. He still walked in the avenue daily with his little boy, who, though later than ordinary, learned to walk, and trotted by his old father's side in a way

which was not quite so pathetic, making the woods ring with a little voice, which, though it was perhaps not so loud as other little boys' voices, was still full of "flichterin' noise and glee." The child was always with his Aunt Agnes when he was indoors, and therefore he acquired something of that undue development which falls to the share of those children brought up exclusively among elder people. Lord Frogmore kept up the habit which his wife and he had established at the beginning of their married life, of having Duke very often at the Park. Duke was now a big boy and at school, but he was exceedingly, tenderly, good to the baby, as boys sometimes are. Little Marmaduke preferred his namesake and cousin (whom he had supplanted) to any one in the world. It was the prettiest relationship: to see the big boy so tender to the small one did the heart good. Duke seemed to know that he had something to make up and was in some special manner appealed to by the delicacy of the little cousin, though indeed it was quite the opposite point of view that commended itself to most people. But Lord Frogmore had thought of that also. He had thought it his duty to provide specially for Duke, which was always something, though it did not by any means subdue the grudge in Letitia's heart.

Thus, however, things went on in a subdued composure and calm of life that was not unhappy. It may be said that the thought of Mary, his wife whom he loved, was never long absent from Lord Frogmore's mind, and gave him many a pang; but still every day, *taking* off a legitimate time for sleep, is at the least, let *us say, fifteen* or sixteen hours long, and there were

many intervals in which he did not think of Mary, or at least not exclusively. And little Marmaduke (who was called Mar to distinguish from his cousin) became very amusing as he grew older, and his father doted upon him. In the evening before it was time to prepare for dinner, and especially in the winter evenings when Mar sat upon his stool before the fire, with the warm light reflected in his eyes, and chattered about everything, the old lord had many happy hours; as happy almost as if it had been Mary and not Agnes who sat on the other side of the fire.

But when a man comes to be seventy-four it is better for him that he should hold these pleasures with a light hand. There seems no reason in particular, in these days when the pressure of age is so much less than it used to be, why a man who has attained that age should not go on till he is eighty-four or more, as is so often the case. But still there are accidents which occur from time to time and prove that humanity is still weak, and that the three-score and ten is a fair limit of life. There was very cold weather in the early winter of the year in which Lord Frogmore completed his seventy-fourth and Marmaduke his fifth year. They both took bad colds, belonging as they did respectively to the most susceptible classes; but little Mar got soon better, whereas Lord Frogmore got worse. It was December, and everything was dark and dreary. The news from the asylum was agitating, for it was reported that Lady Frogmore was passing through an unexpected crisis of her malady, and that "a change" might take place at any moment. A change! what did that mean?

When people in an ordinary illness speak of a change it generally means death. Was this to be the end of everything? The morning after the disturbing intelligence was received Lord Frogmore was in a high fever, and the doctors looked very anxious. It seemed as if poor little Mar was about to lose both parents at once.

CHAPTER XXIV.

LORD FROGMORE'S bronchitis was very severe, so bad that the doctors looked very serious, and notwithstanding the vigilance and understanding of Rogers, who knew his master, as he said, better than any of them —insisted upon adding a trained nurse to all the other embarrassments of the great establishment, which were so heavy upon the shoulders of Agnes Hill. The old lord's grave condition, the ominous announcement of "a change" in her sister's state, the care of that house full of servants, the jealousy of Rogers who could not endure "the woman" who had been placed over his head, and in the midst of all the two noisy boys—Duke, who was at the Park for his holidays, and little Mar, who considered it part of his religion to do everything that Duke did—went near to overwhelm poor Agnes, who had never been used to any great responsibility, and was anxious beyond what words could say. She might, indeed, have spared herself all trouble about the house, since Mr. Upjames, the butler, was fully equal to any emergency; but the susceptibilities of Rogers were a very serious matter. "The only thing for me to do, Miss 'Ill, is to retire," he said. "To have a woman put over my head, and one as knows nothing about it, is more than I can be expected to put up with."

"Oh, Rogers, you must not leave your master. What could he do without you?" cried Agnes, with anxious conciliation.

"That's what I say, ma'am," said Rogers. "I'm torn in two, I am. My lord gives me a look! Though he's choking with his cough, he does like this with his finger; and then he points to her, and he does like that——"

Rogers imitated first the motion of beckoning and then that of pushing away.

"I will speak to the doctor when he comes," said Agnes. "But oh, Rogers, you would never have the heart to leave him? What does it matter about the nurse? Try to make her useful. She does know a great deal, and she might be useful——"

"She don't know nothing about my lord. Miss 'Ill, nobody but me knows my lord," said Rogers solemnly. "I know just what he'll bear, and what he won't bear. He can't be treated like a hospital case. And that's what them women do. As if he was just a number in a bed! He's been very different all his life, has my lord; and that's what he won't bear."

"No," said Agnes soothingly, "of course he won't bear it; and you must just stand between him—— Rogers, what is that? I am sure I heard a carriage driving up to the door."

"It will be someone coming to inquire," said Rogers. "Don't you be frightened, Miss 'Ill. If I can get free of that woman, don't you be miserable. We'll pull him through."

"Do you think it can be anyone coming to inquire?" *cried Agnes.* "Surely there is a great commotion down-

stairs. Oh, Rogers, for Heaven's sake go and see what it is. I heard a cry. What's that? What's that? Surely I know that voice.

Agnes did not know what she feared. There were sounds on the stair which denoted some strange events —many voices together—the sound of steps hurrying. She stood at the door half afraid to open it, listening intently, overcome with alarms which she could not explain. What had happened? The voices came nearer, one of them talking in gentle but persistent tones. Agnes threw up her arms and uttered a wild but faint cry. What did it mean? What could it mean? The wildest hallucination, or her sister's voice?

And then the door was opened quickly, and into the wintry daylight, in which there was no mystery, Mary walked without excitement—smiling, yet with a serious face, as if she had never left her own house where she was supreme, but was coming upstairs after a private consultation with the doctor, in which he had told her that her husband was ill, but not so ill as to cause any extreme of anxiety. She came in smiling to Agnes, and, taking both her hands, kissed her. "I am so glad," she said, "to find you here. Then Frogmore has had someone to rely upon. Fancy I have been away on a visit, and they never told me he was ill till to-day."

"Oh, Mary, dear!" Agnes cried. She was choking with excitement and emotion, but the imperative gesture by which her sister's companion warned her to be on her guard stopped the tears in her eyes and the words in her mouth. Even in that glance Agnes perceived that it was the *doctor* in whose care Mary had been

placed who came in behind her. This did something to still the beating of her amazed and anxious heart.

"Oh, Rogers," said Mary, "I am so glad to see you before I go to him. How is he? He was quite well when I left home. Do tell me everything before I go to him: for I am sure you have never left him, you faithful servant—more faithful than his wife," she said with a smile, turning to the doctor, who stood behind. Lady Frogmore looked exactly as if she had come home from a visit as she said, a little troubled that she had not been sent for at once, yet scarcely anxious. Agnes even thought she looked younger, better, more self-possessed than of old.

"You were not aware he was ill, Lady Frogmore," said the doctor. "You must rest a little and get warmed, and take something—a cup of tea, perhaps—before you go to his room. You must not take in too much cold air to the room of a patient with bronchitis. In the meantime I will go—shall I?—and bring you an exact report."

"Do!" said Mary, "that will be the kindest thing. I can trust to what you say. But it is cold this morning," she added, walking up to the fire. "I must not go and touch my dear old lord with cold hands. How are they at home, Agnes? and how long have you been here?"

"They are quite well," said Agnes, very tremulous. "My father begins to show signs of getting old——"

"I thought him very well indeed the last time I saw him," said Mary; "he can't have grown much older since then. I wonder," she added, "how Frogmore got *this bad cold*—it must have been the very night I went

away. I think men cease taking care of themselves when they have a wife to do it for them. And Rogers used to coddle him so—I must blame Rogers. He ought to have returned to his old habits and watched him more carefully when I was away. What is this. Upjames? Tea? Yes, give it me; it will warm me. I must be warm, you know, when I go to my lord."

"Yes, my lady," said Upjames, in a trembling voice. He was very pale and there was fright in his voice, though he was a large man, and his restored mistress so slim and little likely to harm anyone. "I—I—am so happy, my lady—to see your ladyship so much better."

"Oh there has been nothing the matter with me," said Mary, quickly. "I am always well. But you should not have let my lord catch cold, Upjames, the moment my back was turned. How am I ever to go off on a visit again, however short it may be, when you take so little care of my lord?"

The big butler trembled like a leaf, a gasp came from his throat, his large cheeks hung pendulous with fright. "My lady, I——don't know how it happened," he stammered forth.

"Oh, I was only joking," said Mary, "I am sure it was no one's fault: only there should be double precautions taken about health—by every one—when the mistress of the house is away." She gave forth this maxim with a precision that had never been usual with Mary. Altogether it seemed to her sister that Lady Frogmore had never been so sure of herself, so conscious of authority before. She drank her tea before the fire with evident comfort and pleasure in her home coming.

"After all," she said, "there is nothing like one's own house. What is that I see over there? A rocking horse, is it? I suppose it's a present for one of the Greenpark children. Yes, Mr. Marsden? How do you find my lord?" Fortunately, as Agnes felt, though she scarcely knew why, the doctor came in at this juncture and saved her all further trouble.

"Not so well as I could wish," said the doctor, "but very glad to hear that you have arrived, Lady Frogmore, and anxious to see you. You must not," he added, laying his hand on her arm, "look anxious, or as if you thought him very ill. His spirits must be kept up."

Mary rose and put down her teacup on the table. "I am afraid you find him worse than we thought."

"No," he said, "oh, no—but only to warn you. He does look a little ill: but he must not see that you are anxious. You must make an effort, Lady Frogmore."

"I think I do nothing but make efforts," she said, with a cloud upon her face, standing with her hands clasped together. Then she added, smiling, "But of course I will do what you tell me. How can he have got so ill the little time I have been away?"

Agnes followed, with her heart beating tumultuously in her bosom. What did it all mean? The little time she had been away! What could it mean? Mary spoke as if she had been absent for three days or so—and it was five years! Oh, what could it mean? Agnes followed, not knowing what to do. On her way to the sick-room Mary took off her cloak and furs and her bonnet, which she piled upon a table in the corridor. "*Tell Mason* to take them," she said. Mason was the

maid who had left the house when Mary had been taken away.

How strange it all was, and incomprehensible! This morning Agnes had trembled for the arrival of the letters, not knowing to what tragic tidings the agitating news of "a change" might have come—and had felt as if the burden of anxiety on her was insupportable. Now—was it lifted from her shoulders, or had it become incalculably more heavy? She could not tell. She followed with tremulous steps to the door of Lord Frogmore's room, and then came back again, not venturing to enter. There was nothing for it but to wait till some further development should take place, till something should happen—she did not know what she hoped or feared. Lord Frogmore was very ill. Would the sight of him drive his wife back into the frenzy from which she seemed to have escaped? Would her bewildering appearance act favourably or unfavourably upon the old man, whose vitality had fallen so low? Would sorrow, if sorrow was coming, undo the astonishing advantage that had been gained? Of all these confusing questions the mind of Agnes was full to bursting. She went back to the morning-room where she had been occupying herself as best she could, and keeping down her anxiety when Mary arrived. It was only an hour ago, but how everything had changed! And the boys? What could she say to the boys? how account to them for the strange events that had taken place while they had been out with the forester watching him mark the trees. They were anxious to tell her all about this when they came in, little Mar echoing every word that Duke said, and striking in with little

bits of observation of his own. Agnes, generally so admirable a listener, could scarcely hear what they said for the tumult in her own breast. What was she to tell the children? The meeting, when it came, what would it be? Mary, who thought she had been absent on a visit of a few days, what, oh what would she say to her son? Poor Agnes was like a woman distracted. She trembled at every sound. And to think that she had to sit at table with those eager boys, and to give them their dinner, and talk to them, in terror every moment lest the door should be opened and Mary come in. For what would Mary say to her child?

Every torture comes to an end if we can but wait for it, and the children's dinner was ended at last: they were so eager about the forester and the trees he was marking to cut down, that to Agnes' intense relief they hurried out again as soon as their food was swallowed. Fortunately nobody had told them of the arrival, or else they had been too much absorbed in their own exciting occupation to dwell upon it. Little Mar knew nothing of his mother. Even if he had heard that Lady Frogmore had come home, the child would probably in the bustle of his childish excitement have put no meaning to the words. And Duke, though he was older and had been Mary's favourite, yet had much forgotten her, and would think only of his grandmother, the dowager, if he heard that name. This gave poor Agnes a little comfort in the hurry of her thoughts. She sat alone all the day, very anxious and miserable. The doctor, Lord Frogmore's own doctor, came in for a moment to tell her that he found his patient a little better. "What an *astonishing* recovery this is. It is the most wonderful

thing I ever saw," he said. "She has taken her place by the bedside, as good a nurse as I ever met with. She seems to think of everything. And Lord Frogmore looks quite bright. The cure of one will be the cure of the other I hope. But it is the most wonderful thing I ever saw."

"Do you think it will last, doctor?" cried Agnes.

"Well, one can never say," he replied, oracularly. "Sometimes these things prove a success, sometimes — not. I could not give an opinion. To tell the truth, I would not trust Lady Frogmore with my patient if Marsden was not there. He keeps in the dressing-room out of sight—but he's there, and on the watch. These mad-doctors have strange ways, but I daresay he's right. He has his eye on her all the time. He's not very sure about her, I suppose, or he would not do that; but you and I may make ourselves easy, Miss Hill. It is Lord Frogmore who is my affair—and he is better—certainly better. I will come in the evening and let you know how he is then.

Agnes, on whom the household affairs told heavily, and who had the anxious concern of a simple woman, to whom the provision of meals is one of the chief businesses of life, about regular food, here put in a troubled question about lunch. What should she do about lunch? She had given the boys their dinner, thinking it better not to disturb Lady Frogmore. But Mary must have luncheon. What should she do about lunch? It was reassuring to know that a tray had been taken to the dressing-room, and that Lady Frogmore had been attended to by the watchful guardian who was sharing her vigil. It was very strange altogether.

It disturbed Agnes in every possible way in which a quiet woman could be disturbed, but yet it was a relief. And Miss Hill sat down again with the needle-work which was so poor a pastime in her hands to-day, thinking, wondering, questioning to herself till she could question no more. Many a broken prayer rose to heaven that afternoon for Lord Frogmore. Oh that he might but live. Oh that he might get better! His life was more valuable, Agnes thought, than it ever could have been before. It would be his business to clear up all this imbroglio, to make everything straight. He would have the responsibility, the power would be his alone. And surely, surely, all would go well. Agnes would not look upon the other side of the picture. There must be no other side to the picture. She could not allow herself to think of any darker prospect.

It was evening when Mary came into the drawing-room where Agnes was. The doctors were making their last examination of the patient for the night, and she came in to rest a little, to change the air as she said, to refresh herself. It was time for the boys to go to bed, but they had not paid much attention to Agnes' entreaties, and in the disorganization of the house, which was full of consternation and inquiry, no authoritative messenger from the nursery had as yet come for little Mar. He was seated on his usual stool before the fire, which gave a ruddy colour to his rather pale little face, and sparkled in his dark eyes. Duke lay on the rug stretched out at full length at Agnes' feet. They were chattering still of their busy day. "I wouldn't let him mark that old bush," said little Mar, "it's like an old *man*. *Not* an old man like papa, but one I've seen with

a long beard. Papa's an old gentleman, and they say I'm a little old man, and for love of us I wouldn't have him mark that tree. Oh! Aunt Agnes, here is a lady! Is it the lady that came with a post-chaise, and the marks are all over the grass? Is it——"

"Hush, oh hush, Mar—don't say a word," cried Agnes with her heart leaping in her throat.

Mary came in and sat down beside Agnes, a little behind her. "I will not come to the fire," she said, "for Frogmore's room is very warm. I prefer to get cooled a little. I think he is better, but we will see what the doctors say. They say I ought to lie down, but I don't think I shall want it to-night. I am quite fresh. One never wants to lie down one's first night."

"Oh, my dear, surely, surely they will not let you sit up?"

"Why not?" said Lady Frogmore. "I am quite fresh. I have had no fatigue as yet. And he was so pleased to see me. They all say it has done him good to have me back. What is that on the rug at your feet, Agnes? Why, it is a child! Why it is—Duke, my dear boy! I didn't know you were here. Why, what a leap you have taken, what a huge great boy you have grown."

Duke had sprung to his feet in the surprise. There was little light but the light from the fire—and it was five years since he had seen her. He came forward, hesitating a little, abashed and reluctant to be kissed. He was now twelve and big of his age, not apt to go through these salutations with strangers. Mary put her hands on his shoulders and held him from her to see him fully. "I can't believe my eyes: Duke—are you

sure you are Duke? You are twice as big as you were the other day. Agnes, I can scarcely believe my eyes."

Agnes gave Duke a pull by the arm to stop his exclamation. "Yes," she said, "he has grown very fast."

"I never saw any child grow so fast," said Mary in a bewildered tone. "I should scarcely have known the child." She let him go with something of disappointment in her tone. "I can scarcely believe he is my little Duke," she said. And then after a pause, there came the question which Agnes had been all this time trembling to hear. Mary recovered herself, putting away this touch of disappointment, and spoke again in the clear assured tones which were new to her sister.

"And who," she said, "is this other nice little boy?"

Agnes was overcome by the sufferings of this long and agitating day. Her strength was exhausted. She could bear no more. Little Mar had turned round upon his stool and was gazing at the lady. And she with a smile, and the pleased half interest of a benevolent stranger, looked at him, holding out her hand. "Who," she said, "is this nice little boy?"

Agnes answered, she could not help it, with something more like a scream than an exclamation, "Oh Mary! Oh Mary!" she cried.

"What is the matter?" said Mary, tranquilly. "I ought to know him, perhaps. He is one of Duke's little playfellows, I suppose. Who are you, my nice little boy?"

CHAPTER XXV.

LADY FROGMORE was called to her husband before she had any answer to her question from little Mar. She had asked it with great kindness, with the sweetness of manner which Mary always had with children from the time of her early experiences in the parish with the sturdy little Yorkshire babies—but she had not, to tell the truth, been very deeply interested in the reply. Duke's little playmate had a certain interest because of Duke, that enormously grown, curiously developed boy, but otherwise—"Good-bye, just now, my little man," she said, kissing her hand to him. "Lord Frogmore wants me. I shall hear all about it when I come back." Little Mar crept to the knee of Agnes Hill when Mary went away. He clung to her with a close childish pressure, rubbing his little head against her shoulder. "Why does she call papa Lord Frogmore?" the boy said.

"I don't know, my dear. She has been gone a long time from home—and there are some things that she has forgotten."

"Who is the lady, Aunt Agnes?"

"Oh, Mar!" cried Agnes, with a tone of reproach.

"I know," said the little boy. "You told me: but even grown up people, old people, make mistakes, don't they, sometimes? It must be—a mistake."

Agnes shook her head; but she could not find a word to say. Her heart was like a stone within her. Had such a thing ever been heard of as that a mother should forget her only child!

But Mary's heart was not heavy. She went away lightly through the long corridor to the old lord's room, and entered it like a sunbeam, smiling on every one. Mary had been a woman easily cast down in her old natural life, an anxious woman, a little apt to take a despondent view. But she was so far from being despondent now that she scarcely showed gravity enough for a sick-room. She went in and took her place by the sick-bed where her old husband lay, shrunken and worn out, with fever in his eyes, and a painful cough that tore him in two.

"I think," she said, "that already you are looking a great deal better, Frogmore."

"I am afraid the doctors don't think me better," said the old lord, "and to be prepared in case of anything that may happen I want to have a very serious talk with you, my dear."

"Nay, Frogmore," she said, with a beaming smile, "not so very serious. The chief thing is to keep up your spirits. I know by experience that it is half the battle. We shall have plenty of time for serious talks."

"Well, my love, I am willing to hope so," said Lord Frogmore, with a faint smile. "But it can do us no harm to make sure. There are a few things I am very anxious to talk over with you. I shall be very sorry to leave you alone, my poor Mary, especially now when

there are such good hopes. Our life together has not been so cloudless as I had hoped, but you have made me very happy all the same, my dear love. You must never forget that."

"Dear Frogmore," said Mary in a slightly injured tone. "I cannot imagine what you mean when you say our life has not been cloudless. It sounds as if you were disappointed in me—for to me it has been like one long summer day!"

"My poor dear—my poor dear!" he said, feebly caressing the hand that held his own.

"Not your poor dear! I have been a happy woman—far more happy than I could ever have looked for: and I mean to continue so," she added with a little nod of her head which was almost coquettish. "I haven't the least intention of talking of it as if it were in the past."

Behind Lady Frogmore in the distance of the large room was someone who looked little more than a shadow, but who took a step forward when the conversation came to this point, and made a warning gesture to the old lord over his wife's head. Lord Frogmore replied with an impatient twitch of his eyebrows and resumed:

"I don't want to vex you, my love—but life's very uncertain for the best of us. It's hard to tell what a day is to bring forth. I never thought this morning that I should be so happy as to have you with me, Mary, to-night."

"No," she said, "how wrong it was of them not to tell me; of course, the moment I was told I came away

at once. But you must have known that I would come as soon as I knew that you wanted me, Frogmore."

"Yes," he said, with his kind, indulgent smile. "I ought to have known that. At all events, my dear, here you are at last."

"At last! he talks," said Mary with a laugh, as if appealing to some one, "as if I had been years away."

The poor old lord patted her hand with his feverish fingers. There was something piteous in the contrast between his serious anxiety and the light-hearted confidence in her tone. "Well," he said after a time, "my love—to return to what we were saying. I needn't tell you, Mary, the chief subject I am concerned about—the bringing up of little Mar. You can't think," he said after a pause with a little fervour, "what that baby has been to me while you've been away."

"What baby?" she said, almost with a look of offence, drawing away her hand. "I am surprised, Frogmore, that you should want anyone to take my place for—such a short time."

"To take your place?" he said, "oh, no; but to wait for you along with me: for to whom else could it be of so much importance, next to me—and who could comfort me like him, Mary! You must be strong now for Mar's sake."

"I don't know what you mean, Frogmore," she said, her colour changing. "It is impossible to me to make out what you mean. You seem to speak in riddles. I *don't* know who this child is you have taken such a *fancy to*. But you mustn't expect me to follow you in

that. I will do anything for your sake, dear, but to give myself up to a strange child whom I know nothing about——"

"Whom you know nothing about! Oh, Mary, my poor Mary," he cried.

"Whom I know nothing at all about," she said with some vehemence. "The one I suppose that comes in to play with Duke. Frogmore, I hope you have not given Duke's place in your heart to any stranger. Oh, I say nothing against the boy!"

"To a stranger!" cried the old man, with a piercing tone of pain.

"Oh, my dear Frogmore, oh, my dear! I would not for the world cross you, and if it is a little favourite—of course I shall take care of him, and love him—try to love him—for your sake: but you must not care for him too much on the other hand," she said, playfully, though with an effort, lifting up her finger—"to interfere with me—or Duke."

The old gentleman looked at her with eyes full of pain—"Oh, my poor Mary," he said, "can you not remember—try and remember—what happened before you went away?"

"I remember very well, my dear," she said, "only it is strange that you should talk of my going away as if it had been something of the greatest importance. To hear you speak one would think I had deserted you—run away from you—left you alone for years."

"Dr. Marsden," said Lord Frogmore. He repeated the call impatiently in another minute, "Dr. Marsden!"

"Do you want to speak to Dr. Marsden? I am sure he will be here directly. Oh, here he is," said Mary, looking round with a little surprise. "He must have been quite close by."

"Dr. Marsden," cried Frogmore, with a gasp for breath, "is this how it is always to be?"

"I hope not," said Dr. Marsden. "Things will arise naturally to awaken old recollections; but we must not force anything—we must not force anything. In that case we should only lose what we have gained."

"But I have no time to wait," cried the old lord—"I—have no time to wait——"

As he spoke he was seized with one of the dreadful fits of coughing which shook his old frame. There is nothing more dreadful than to look on at one of those *accès* which threaten to shake the very life out of a worn and exhausted body, and to feel how utterly helpless we are, how incapable of doing anything to relieve or succour. Mary, though she was so placid and confident, so sure that all would be well, was greatly troubled by this attack. She had always been thought a good nurse, but for a good nurse in the uninstructed sense, there is nothing so difficult, nothing so dreadful as to do nothing. She hurried to put her arm under the pillows to raise up the sufferer, to support him in her arms, and was altogether cast down when her trusted doctor put his hand upon her shoulder and drew her away.

"But something must be done—his head must be *raised—he* must be supported——"

"My dear lady, he must be left alone—you only disturb him," the doctor said.

She withdrew to a little distance and cast herself down in a chair, and covered her face: but it was not enough not to see, for she could still hear the spasm that shook his old frame. He must be left alone—you only disturb him—— What terrible words were those to say! Was it, she wondered in her confused brain, because of the delusion in his that she had abandoned him? How could he think she had abandoned him? His head must have gone wrong, to think of her short visit to the Marsdens as if it had been a desertion. And this little boy who had been a comfort to him——! Mary could not understand it. The heart which had been so light to come home, so sure that as soon as she was there to take care of him Frogmore would get well, began to sink: you only disturb him! Oh, was it possible that this was the sole issue of her nursing, she who had always been considered the best of nurses! Mary began to cry silently, under cover of the hands in which she had hidden her face, and despair stole into her heart. The sound of the coughing filled the room, persistently, going on and on. Now and then came a break and she thought it was over, but it only began again. And the doctor stood there, only looking on, doing nothing, and Rogers, who somehow stepped out of the shadow behind in anxious attendance too, was doing nothing. So many of them, with the command of everything that money could buy, and yet they could do nothing! The poorest tramp on the wayside could not have coughed more incessantly or with less

help from anything that could be done for him than Lord Frogmore.

After this the evening seemed to speed away in an incoherent troubled blank, as it does when illness is present absorbing every interest. It seemed to be ten o'clock, then midnight, before any one was aware that the day was ended; and yet every minute was so long. Mary sat a little apart, with a strange pained sensation of reluctance to subject herself again to that reproach —*You disturb him*—which rankled in her mind: and vaguely, dimly, saw many things pass which she did not understand. The little boy, for instance, was brought in and flung himself upon Frogmore's bedside, the old lord turning his worn face to him, stroking the little pale cheeks with his trembling withered hands, and kissing the child again and again. "Oh father," the child said, "father!" and Frogmore murmured, "my little boy, my little man!" in his feeble voice, again and again. Mary sat bolt upright and looked on, with I cannot tell what wonder and wretchedness in her eyes. She was put away from her husband's side, and this little thing had his tenderest words. Where had he come home from, that little boy? and by what strange chance had he thus become the sweetest and dearest thing to Frogmore? Sometime in the middle of that long feverish blank which was the night, Dr. Marsden came to her and insisted she should go to bed. "He is a little quieter now, and there is nothing to be done. Nothing. Nothing that you or anyone can do. You promised to do whatever I told you when I said I would bring you home, Lady Frogmore."

Mary made no answer to this voice which came to her in the long silence, and which she was not very sure was anything but a voice in a dream. She looked up into the face of her doctor with a dumb obstinacy which he did not attempt to overcome. For her only answer she crept back to the bedside and took her place again there, and watched and watched till a cold blue stole through the closed curtains and every crevice, and the candles and lamp seemed to grow sick and pale, and it was day again. Frogmore's face looked grey like the daylight when that pitiless, all pervading light came in; but his eyes turned to her with wistful affection, and he put out his old, withered, aged hand. And then the light faded away.

When Lord Frogmore died his wife behaved like a woman whose sanity was completely restored. The mad-doctor, who had proved himself both wise and kind in his unexpected attendance at this deathbed, watched her with the most anxious care, but with great relief. She understood the blow that had fallen upon her, and her grief was great and natural, but self-controlled. She burst forth into no ravings, nor did she show any want of comprehension. She allowed herself to be taken away when all was over, and yielded to the directions of her physician with the old gentle docility. After an hour or two of quiet weeping she fell asleep with her hand in her sister's hand—a gentle woman stricken with deep loss, but very patient, giving no trouble, just what Mary would have been in other circumstances. Agnes Hill sat by her for hours, feeling as if in a sanctuary, while she listened to her sister's

calm breathing and saw the soft tears steal from under her eyelids—a sanctuary of peaceful sorrow, of patience, not rebellious, not excessive, least of all mad. Agnes sat and cried with an ache in her breast which Mary did not know. The boy! What was to happen to the boy? When Mary woke again, when she came out again into ordinary life—and if the amendment continued and her sanity was recognized, could it be that she would still ignore the boy?

END OF VOL. I.



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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.





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MRS. OLIPHANT,

AUTHOR OF

"FOR LOVE AND LIFE," "A COUNTRY GENTLEMAN," ETC.

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IN TWO VOLUMES.—VOL. II.

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BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1892.



THE HEIR PRESUMPTIVE

AND

THE HEIR APPARENT.

CHAPTER I.

"THERE is no will but the early one made soon after the marriage," said Lord Frogmore's man of business on the morning of the second day. "No guardians appointed, no directions given. I have said as much as I could from time to time on this subject. Lord Frogmore always agreed but did nothing; and now here we have a long minority to face and nothing in order." He was speaking in the most confidential circle of the family, addressing the old vicar, who had been summoned with his wife to the double crisis, the death of their son-in-law, the recovery of their daughter. Old Mr. Hill was standing up with his back to the fire, looking like a very solemn old sheep with his white beard. He had always the air of bearing the weight of the whole world on his shoulders, and mumbled a

little in his speech, half with nervousness, half with that weight of responsibility that bowed him down.

"It is a very great emergency," said the vicar. "Frogmore was very imprudent for a man of his time of life. He ought to have had it all made out very clear. He ought to have left nothing in any doubt. I have often said to him myself in my own small affairs——"

It was wrong of Mrs. Hill to interrupt, but she had a bad habit of doing this; her husband spoke so slowly. "Now that my daughter is so well again," she said, with a voice in which there was a quiver in spite of herself, "it can't matter so much."

"Oh, mother!" cried Agnes.

The man of business shook his head. "That is just the worst difficulty of all. If Lady Frogmore insists on this strange fancy of hers that the little lord is not her son—that she has no child——"

"Oh!" cried the mother in a tone of intolerable impatience— "That is nonsense, you know, Mr. Blotting. Why, I was there! How can she persist when every body knows to the contrary. My daughter Mary has been troubled in her mind, poor thing; but she never was idiotic I hope—and when I speak to her—Agnes, what nonsense! I must speak to her! It is the most dreadful dereliction of duty to let things like this go on——"

"Dr. Marsden says she is going through a very important crisis," said Agnes; "and that her mind must not be disturbed——"

"Oh, Dr. Marsden!" cried Mrs. Hill: she did not *say blank him*, or dash him, or anything that a clergy-

man's wife ought not to say—but she meant it, as was very clear. "How should Mr. Marsden know better than her mother?" she inquired with dignity, as if to such a question there could be but one reply.

"I am of the same opinion as your mother," said the vicar. "I think you will find after I have had a conversation with her that there will be no further trouble. She will not stand out against me."

"Oh!" Mrs. Hill cried—and stopped again—for she had not the same faith in her husband's intervention. "But," she added quickly, "I am of opinion that when she is told the facts calmly, with the proofs I can bring—for I saw everything with my own eyes—Mary who was always a reasonable creature — you know," she cried, with a little laugh and toss of her head: "there never was such a thing known in this world as that a mother should disown her child."

"No doubt," said Mr. Blotting, "there will be no want of proof. The little lord's rights are safe enough. But who's to have the custody?—not a mad mother who disowns him——"

"Sir!" cried Mrs. Hill, springing to her feet.

"Mr. Blotting," said the vicar, "forgets, my dear—forgets of whom he's speaking. Such a phrase used of my daughter——"

"I beg your pardon," said the man of business. He looked at Agnes, who had said nothing, whose eyes were anxiously fixed upon him. "I mean no offence. I must face the facts. What would the Court of Chancery or any other authority think of a mother who denied that her child was hers? She says she knows nothing about it, that she never had a child. It's

monstrous; it's incredible. She says the most astounding things."

"What, what?" cried the old people, both together. They were half reproachful of Mary, wholly impatient of her folly, yet half excusing and apologizing all the time.

"She says it is quite impossible she could ever have done such a thing. I can only give you the poor lady's own words. She says she was bound in honour to someone—a woman's name—probably you will know. Poor soul! Bound in honour to Jane or Marjorie never to have a child! I don't want to hurt your feelings, but who do you think would give her the charge even of her own affairs after such a speech as that?"

"Who is Jane or Marjorie?" said the vicar, mouthing the words. "I don't know anybody of those names."

The mother and daughter looked at each other. They were under no difficulty in understanding. "Oh," said Mrs. Hill, "her worst enemy! Do you mean to say that after all my poor child has borne from that woman——"

"Dear mother!" said Agnes. "Oh, let us wait a little—let us do nothing in a hurry. I suppose it has been known before that a poor woman might be sane enough with one delusion. That is Mary's case. She is sane, but she has forgotten. She never saw her baby. It seized her at once, that terrible trouble. She never knew. Don't you remember, mother, how she lay like a log, never caring, never looking at him. Oh, Mr. Blotting, don't let her be sent away again for that! In every other way she is sane, my poor sister is sane."

"*I am* sincerely sorry for you, Miss Hill," the lawyer

said. But he gave no pledge, he made no promise. "It will depend chiefly upon John Parke," he said, "as one of the executors, and the child's uncle. He of course is the natural guardian. And he no doubt will hear what the doctors have to say, and decide what is best to be done with Lady Frogmore."

"John Parke!" both the old people cried again; Mrs. Hill adding in almost a shriek—"And Tisch—Tisch, who hates my poor Mary, who would like to kill her! Oh, you will never put the boy in her hands."

"I fail to see," said the vicar, mumbling. "I fail to see what can be the need of John Parke when her parents are here."

"My dear sir," said the man of business, "John Parke is the nearest relation. He's an executor. He's the heir, if anything should happen to the little boy—a very delicate little boy I hear, like old men's children generally—and with insanity on one side. You really must forgive me if I speak my mind. I have been connected with the Parkes, I and my firm, for longer than any one can say; but I never knew such a sad conjunction of affairs."

The Hills, it was evident, were very much startled by this speech. The vicar stood before the fire swaying his heavy head, looking at the floor, while Mrs. Hill, who was more active of mind, made little starts as if to begin speaking, then stopped with the words on her lips.

"Do you mean to say," said Agnes, "that everything will be in—Mr. John Parke's hands?"

"I am the other executor," said the man of business,

not without a little demonstration of the importance which these country people had seemed to ignore.

"But," said the vicar, "we are Lady Frogmore's parents—I am the child's grandfather, nearer than an uncle. Why, my wife was here when he was born."

"And we have no object to serve," cried Mrs. Hill, bursting forth, "none, none, but their good. It's for John Parke's advantage that—that harm should come. He can't be supposed to be fond of little Mar. And his wife—why, Tisch, Tisch, everybody knows!—she has her own boy that she thinks ought to be the heir. He's not safe, he's not safe if he's in Tisch Ravelstone's hands!"

"Mother, mother!" cried Agnes, in dismay.

"You will excuse me saying," said the lawyer, "that I can't listen to anything of this kind. Ladies go a long way I know in what they permit themselves to say of each other, but with men of the world, madam, libels can't be indulged in. Mrs. John Parke——"

"Oh!" said Mrs. Hill, breathing out fire and fury in the word, "what has Mrs. John Parke to do with my child—or with my grandchild, Mr. Blotting? We have no object but their good. We want nothing but their good. If anything were to happen to little Mar it would be my death. Oh, can't you see, can't you see the difference? I don't say she would poison him or throw him out of a window," cried the old lady, flushed and trembling with her vehemence. "But it would be for her good that the child should die. Do you hear me, oh do you hear me! It would be to her advantage that the child should die, the dear child, the apple of our *eyes. It* would give her husband the title—and herself

which is more:—it would make her boy the heir. And you will put him in her hands, our little delicate boy, our little darling, poor Frogmore's little Mar! Oh vicar, speak to him. Oh Agnes, say something—don't let them throw little Mar's life away!"

"I can only say," said the vicar, shuffling about with his large feet, "that we're Lady Frogmore's parents, and the child's guardians by—by nature. I can't see what there's more to say."

"It's clear that I can hear no more," said the lawyer, "it's painful to see such animosity. Still we know what ladies are. Had anything been necessary to show how impossible—— But there never could have been any question of such a thing," he continued sharply. "Mr. Hill, you ought to be enough a man of the world to see that the mother's parents have nothing to do with the matter. Why, it's ridiculous. The mother herself is no more than a sort of accident. What I've got to think of is the Parkes, the family. It is astonishing you don't understand."

"Mr. Blotting," said Agnes, "my mother perhaps went too far. We don't want to show prejudice. Still the child is a delicate child—and he's been used to us all his life—to me, at least—I've been the same as his mother," she said with the tears in her eyes. "I know all he requires: their treatment might be dangerous for him. Don't take him from us until he's older and stronger. I don't ask anything unreasonable. Mrs. Parke, I don't doubt, would be—very kind: but she's used to robust children—and little Mar is so delicate."

"She is pleading as if it was a favour," cried Mrs. Hill, "as if we had no right——"

"You had better both of you leave it to me—leave it to me," said the vicar. "I'll talk it over with this gentleman, as a man of the world. My dear, you can go and look after Mary. That's your business. Leave me to talk it over, like a man of the world." The vicar was pleased with that appeal to his superior wisdom. He wanted nothing so much as to get rid of the ladies and bring Mr. Blotting to a due sense of the situation, man to man.

"Sir ——," Mrs. Hill began; but Agnes, too, was against her. She caught her mother by the arm.

"Oh, father is right," she said. "Let us go to Mary. I never know what she may be doing when we leave her too long alone. It is not good for her to be long alone."

The house through which these two ladies made their way upstairs had changed in the strangest way. It was not neglected or out of order, nor had it the deserted appearance, as if life had altogether ebbed away from the forsaken sitting-rooms, which often shows the presence of death, throned in a remote chamber, and making an end even of family meetings. Mr. Upjames at the head of affairs took care of that, and as John Parke and his wife were expected in the afternoon, there were fires in all the rooms, and everything ready for the visitors, who were felt by all the household instinctively to have so much risen in importance. The decorous silence, which was proper to a house "in trouble," reigned, however, up and down. The servants glided about like mutes, stealing noiselessly out of sight, or flattening themselves against the wall when by chance *they encountered* "one of the family;" and the discipline

was such that not a voice or a laugh betrayed from behind the swing doors the existence of a number of young servants, who, however impressed by the circumstances, could not be overcome with grief. The feeling in the house, it must be allowed, was in favour of the visitors who were expected rather than those who had arrived. The Hills were "the other side" to the retainers of the Parke faction. They saw through the vicar's bulk and solemnity, and they were aware by instinct that the old lady would be hard upon servants and keep an inquisitive eye upon their shortcomings. They were, therefore, though perfectly civil, not anxious in their service to my lady's people. My lady, herself, poor thing, the servants were half afraid of, half sorry for. They thought she might have another attack at any moment. The women shrank back upon each other when they attended to her rooms or answered her bell. The maid whom she had brought with her was even more alarming than herself, a mad-nurse who knew all about the things that were done to lunatics, though she put on the aspect of an ordinary lady's maid. Thus poor Mary, who had been so kind to them all, who was so gentle and so soft-voiced, sympathetic with everybody, was a sort of bugbear in the house from which she had been banished so long, to which she had returned so strangely. And all through this great silent house there was a thrill of uncertainty,—nobody knowing what was to be done, or what the new *régime* would be. The little lord in the nursery, poor little delicate boy who would never be "rared" as all the country people said, who was a child of old age, with madness on one side of the house, whose father was dead and whose mother

denied his existence: and the poor lady shut up in her rooms, in her grief and widowhood, with the maid who was nurse, and the mad-doctor hanging about, ever watchful, not leaving her long out of his sight: the troubled group who hung about her, and about the child, yet had no real right there, and might be put to the door by the executors any day—made up a miserable family—a disturbed, uncertain, uncomfortable, little community—not knowing what was to happen. The only one in the house who was calm, who feared nothing, was Mary herself in her retirement, half cured of her madness, full of gentle sorrow without anguish, and ignoring altogether in a strange bewilderment of nature all the dangers and miseries amid which, the most innocent of unconscious sufferers, she was about to take up without protection or support the strange story of her life.

CHAPTER II.

LADY FROGMORE had not been much disturbed by any external interruption since she had been led away from her husband's room after his death. Poor Mary was very natural in all her ways. She took her sorrow sweetly like the gentle woman she was. There was an hour or two during which she lay weeping on the bed, saying now and then some broken words—how good he was, her dear old lord, how tender, how kind—and what was she to do without him who had been so good to his poor Mary! Agnes, not crying so much, feeling the dreadful blank and change perhaps more, sat by her sister's beside and held her hand, and received her broken confidences. Poor Mary did not repine, she did not even grieve as at first that she had not been there when Frogmore was taken ill, that they did not send for her soon enough. Even that had floated away from her mind. The tears came flowing from her eyes and the tender words from her lips. Dear Frogmore! There never had been any one like him, so kind! so kind! How was she to live without her old husband, her dear companion? In Mary's mind there was no consciousness that she had been absent from her husband for years; yet, perhaps, though she was not aware of it, this fact had something to do with the calm of her sorrow.

There was no despair in her mourning. By-and-bye she allowed herself to be undressed, to take the draught prepared for her and go to bed. Agnes still sat by her thinking of many things, but it did not occur to anybody that Agnes had anything but a very secondary part in the trouble. And Mary slept and woke again and shed more tears, and then rose up with a patient face and a quiver in her lip, and was very anxious that a black gown might be found somewhere in her wardrobe, turning with a shiver from the others she had been wearing. "I shall never more wear anything but black," she said. A little later she was able to think of her mourning and the mourning for the house: both which had to be seen to without delay. Agnes was ready to write the necessary letters, but Lady Frogmore herself joined in the consultation about what would be wanted, and quietly put down Mrs. Hill's economical suggestions. There were a great many things to think of, and Mary was greatly disturbed to find that a small room which opened from her own was quite open, the sunshine coming in and the outer world visible. "Oh, how is this!" she said; "the blinds are not down nor the shutters closed."—"They are, over all the house, my lady," said the maid; "but I thought just this little room, which nobody can see, which is not seen from outside——" —"Oh, close it, close it at once," said Lady Frogmore. "I can't bear it—and my dear lord lying dead in the house." This made her tears flow again; but when the light was shut out she resumed with her mother and sister the consultation about the mourning. She thought of the paper with the deepest black border, and cards to be printed. It seemed to

please her to have this occupation, these trifles which had to be attended to—"I suppose," she said, her voice trembling, her eyes filling—"I must now call myself Dowager on my cards——"

"Oh, no, my dear Mary, no—why should you—not for years and years."

"You must not think it will hurt me, mother. Oh, no, no! What do I care for anything but losing *him*. It will not vex me to call John by his name—or Letitia——" She stopped again, her voice failing her. "Oh, Letitia," she said, "cannot blame me now. She will have nothing, nothing to say against me now."

"Mary, for goodness sake, do not speak to me of that woman. I can't bear to hear her name in your mouth," cried Mrs. Hill.

Agnes gave her mother a look, and laid her hand upon her sister's. "There is one other thing, Mary," she said, turning the talk to the mourning. There are times when that mourning is a great relief to the poor people who are shut up with their sorrow and can talk of nothing but the one dreadful subject which fills heaven and earth. Mary returned to the thought of all those necessary gowns for the housemaids with a sort of dismal relief. But when she was left to herself again, her thoughts returned to Letitia—Letitia was coming in the afternoon. There was in Lady Frogmore's thoughts a faint terror of her former friend mingled with a sort of consolatory consciousness that Letitia could have nothing against her now. All must be right now. Mary's little superiority was over. She would not have been sorry had it not involved the loss of Frogmore, and now that he was gone it was a consolation to think

that she no longer stood in anybody's way, that she could injure no one any more. Letitia would forgive her now. There had been no harm done. She could not regret—no, not even for Letitia, that she had married her dear old lord. It seemed to Mary that it had been a very short time, only a few months, since she married Frogmore. And it had done no harm. Letitia would have to acknowledge that now. They were none the worse for it. This gave her a little consolation in the midst of her tears.

Meanwhile John Parke and his wife were travelling gloomily towards Frogmore. It would be vain to say that even John, his brother, was deeply affected by the death of the old lord. That would have been too much to expect in any case. Neither could it be said that during the five years past they had thought of nothing but the wrong inflicted upon them by Lord Frogmore's marriage, and the birth of the boy who stood between them and all their hopes of advancement in life. In five years the mind gets accustomed even to such a misfortune as that, and though they may not feel it less, people don't dwell upon a thing so far off as they did when it was fresh in their thoughts. The death of Lord Frogmore, however, brought it all back. But for Mary, but for that boy, what a changed world it would now have been for them! By this time it was they who would have been Lord and Lady Frogmore. They would have been going to take possession of their own great family house, to come into their fortune. Hope would by this time have become reality to them—if it had not been for Mary and that miserable puny boy. *Even* John could not help thinking of this as he looked

moodily out of the window of the railway carriage and plucked at his moustache. His servants would already have begun to "my lord" him. His difficulties (for he had difficulties though his wife was so excellent a manager) would all have been over. Good God! and to think that a bit of a sickly child, a creature that nobody wanted, had done him out of all that! It was enough to distract the mind of a saint.

As for Letitia, all that and a great deal more was in her mind. She had not been at the Park since that dreadful day when she had discovered what had befallen Mary, and had known that it was she herself who had done it. Since then, though Duke had been a frequent visitor, his parents had never been invited by Frogmore, and Letitia knew why. And now she was going to see Mary, who it was said had recovered all at once and come home. This was a wonderful story, which it was almost impossible to believe; and Letitia, with her guilty conscience, could not but think there was some hidden meaning in it. Mary, suddenly well, returned all in a moment!—it did not seem credible. She set out to accompany John to the house of mourning with very mingled feelings—indignant to have to go there at all, in a position which contrasted so cruelly with her hopes. But also, in spite of all her self-command and capacity for excusing herself, Letitia was afraid in her heart of meeting Mary, terrified for her look, wondering how much she remembered, how much she knew. She could not form an idea to herself how she would be received by her old friend. She was afraid of Mary—afraid lest Lady Frogmore should betray her to John, and make her stolid but upright hus-

band aware of the harm she had done. And also, if truth must be told, Mrs. Parke was afraid of the mad woman whom she had injured, and of whose cure she thought nobody could be certain. She was not a brave woman physically, though it is not necessary to be a coward to fear an insane person. The bravest may quail in such circumstances. An insane person whom you have wronged; who probably will remember the wrong; who will be cunning and vindictive, as mad people are known to be. Letitia's thoughts were not of a pleasant kind as she travelled towards the home of her husband's race. She dared not shrink or refuse to do the duty which was incumbent upon her. But she was white and trembling in her furs, quite unable to get warm or to repress the shiver that ran over her from time to time. John observed this with the terror of a man who had never been apt to meet an emergency by himself. "For goodness' sake," he said, "take something! Have a glass of wine—have a little brandy. I can get you some brandy at the station. Don't get ill now, Letitia, for heaven's sake." She nodded her head at him with the best smile she could conjure up. She certainly was a faithful woman so far as that was concerned. She would not at such a crisis leave John to his own devices—not whatever might happen. Rather have the lunatic fly upon her than that—— But, all the same, she went on to the Park in terror of her life.

The great house standing all shadowed in the wintry sunshine, every shutter shut and every blind drawn down, was a dismal sight enough, not calculated to raise any one's spirits. The great door was standing *open, and* inside were several servants, Upjames in the

foreground to receive the visitors and show his own pre-eminence. Behind stood the old vicar, with whom and his big head and his mumbling voice Letitia felt a sickening familiarity as if he were always there in the worst moments of her life. She remembered him just like that when she had made her assault in the vicarage in the vain endeavor to frighten Mary from marrying old Frogmore. She had seen him again before the birth of the child. And here he was once more as she came in cold and trembling, terrified for what was before her. Behind the vicar another man was hanging about, a tall man in a long coat, which swung behind him as he strolled about the hall, stooping, with his shoulders thrust up to his ears. She divined at once that this was the mad-doctor not yet separated from his patient. Letitia let her fur cloak drop off her shoulders into the footman's hands, and appeared not to see the vicar's hand which was stretched out with the intention of giving her that silent clasp of sympathy which is the right thing in a house of mourning. "Oh, how do you do?" she said. "I am going at once to Mary," and passed him quickly, leaving John to make the explanations. She felt that as far as she herself was concerned the worst must be got over at once. Upstairs in the corridor a woman was standing whom Letitia did not know, too serious for a maid, too important for a servant of the house. "Are you Lady Frogmore's — attendant?" said Mrs. Parke. She was half afraid, as the servants were, of the woman, who, if not mad herself, was a mad-nurse. "Yes, my lady," said the stranger, a mode of address which made the heart burn in Letitia's bosom. Ah! but for that child, that wretched little boy,

this would be her proper title now. "I am Mrs. Parke," she said breathlessly. "How is Lady Frogmore?"

"Oh, my lady, she is wonderful," said the woman. Lady Frogmore's attendant knew what her mistress thought, and she believed like Mary that Mrs. Parke was now in reality Lady Frogmore, though good breeding prevented her from adopting the title until the old lord was buried. "She is as much herself as her dearest friend could wish her—she is as collected as you or me."

"What an extraordinary thing!" said Letitia. "Is it thought to be a complete cure?"

"Ah!" said the nurse, "that no man can tell till time has proved it. Things that come of a sudden sometimes go off of a sudden too. But in the meantime what a blessing, my lady! She was able to be with his lordship to the last. And as calm now, and as composed, though sorrowful, as a lady could be."

"Then she is quite——safe?" said Letitia with a slight shudder.

"My lady!" said the woman with indignation. "She was never but like a blessed lamb even at the worst."

"I know; I know. She was always gentle. Don't think badly of me," said Mrs. Parke, "but I've a great horror of—of that sort of thing. Would you mind coming in with me? And just be near me, please, whatever might happen. It would give me great confidence. If you only look at her, it's enough, isn't it? Oh! do stay by me when I go in, please."

"You are doing my poor lady great injustice," said the attendant with outraged dignity.

"*Oh, no*—not that—but you'll stand by me, won't

you?" Letitia said. She went on towards Mary's door with a slackened step. Not even the assurance she had received, not her conviction that what the nurse said was true, could stand against her conscience, and sense of what she deserved from Mary. She might be a lamb to others, but Letitia had no right to count upon her as a lamb. When she opened the door she looked back and beckoned to the attendant, who was slowly following. "You'll stand by me?" she said again, and eventually knocked at Mary's door.

Lady Frogmore and her sister were together in the room. Mary had been trying to read a little in a good book. To read anything that might amuse her, that would draw her thoughts from herself and her sorrow, would have been profane, almost wicked. Mary was far too dutiful to think of anything of the kind, but it was not wrong, it was indeed edifying, to read a little of a sermon about heaven. It conveyed, indeed, no idea at all to the poor lady's mind, and to think of Lord Frogmore as having been swept up among those abstractions was quite impossible: but still it was a right thing to do. She put it down, however, with alacrity when she heard Letitia's knock at the door, and came forward a step or two as much as was decorous to meet her sister-in-law. A newly-made widow must not hurry forward with extended hands. It is her place to keep still, to have her visitors brought up to her. "Here I and sorrow sit." Mary was very observant of all the conventionalities; but when Letitia, trembling, came up to her and put her shaking arms around her, Mary responded with a cordiality which overwhelmed the visitor. She held Letitia close, and wept upon her shoulder,

Mrs. Parke trembling all the time, restraining herself with an effort of horror from shrieking, and not at all sure that she might not be rent to pieces at the end of the embrace. "Oh, Letitia! it is all over, all over. My poor old lord is gone," cried Mary, sobbing. She added, a moment after in a voice that went through and through the hearts of the other listeners, but struck upon that of Mrs. John Parke like some strange chord of which she had no understanding: "and after all there is no harm done to you! It is my only consolation. After all there is no harm done to you!"

"Oh, Mary! It is a sad blow to us all, but we must bear it," said Letitia, disengaging herself from the embrace which she so feared. She cast a glance round to see that the nurse was near, and strengthened by this, sat down at a little distance from the new-made widow. "It is a great loss," she said, putting up her handkerchief to her eyes; "so kind to us as he always was. But we must seek for resignation and strength to bear it."

"Indeed he was kind to everybody." said Agnes, hoping to keep the strange interview upon safe ground.

"And what a good thing you were able to come back to be with him at the last!" said Mrs. John.

"My dear Letitia," said Mary, "I can't find words to tell you—You must not think I will feel it that you should have my name—or that Mr. Parke should have his name. Oh, no! I shall not. You must not put aside your rights out of any thought of me. I am only the Dowager now, and you are Lady Frogmore."

"Oh," cried Mrs. John, springing to her feet, "I knew *all that was* said was nonsense, and that there never

would be a cure. Agnes Hill, you may risk your life, but I will not risk mine—at the mercy of a——"

She had sprung up from her chair with a scared face, and hurried towards the door. As for Mary, she did not understand this recoil of her sister-in-law from her. "What is it?" she said; "what is it? Why should she have any grudge against me? Tell her, Agnes, that I have no grudge; that I am glad. After all, though she was so frightened of me, I have done her no harm."

CHAPTER III.

LETITIA hurried along the passage to the room which she always occupied at the Park, and where Felicie was already arranging her "things" out of the box. She took refuge in this room as in a safe place, and locked the door behind her with an impulse of fright. When, however, she sat down panting, to think it over, reassured by these walls and by the tranquil presence of her maid busied about ordinary concerns, and by the conviction that Mary was in the hands of the attendant and would not be allowed to follow her, Mrs. Parke began to perceive that her panic might be thought foolish, and that there was really nothing to be afraid of. "For they would never have allowed her to hurt me," she said to herself—"and she did not mean to hurt me, poor thing. She meant to be kind. She was always silly," Letitia said to herself, her old contempt for Mary Hill beginning to get the better of her panic and terror of Lady Frogmore. But her heart again jumped to her mouth when the sound of someone running along the corridor ended in a thump upon the locked door. "Oh, don't open it, don't open it, Felicie!" she said, springing up to hide herself. She was only stopped by the sound of a voice which came in along with the drumming. "*Mamma,* mamma, open—mamma, let me in, I want

mamma," said the intruder. Even then Letitia had horrible visions of the mad-woman taking advantage of the opportunity, while Duke was admitted, to rush in upon her victim. But even the boy's presence was an additional protection. He would come between her and any assault. He was a big, strong boy. When John Parke came in just behind his son, Letitia felt almost at her ease. Between them, the man and the boy could surely deal with the maniac. She could not in their presence do any real harm. John Parke's face was covered with clouds; he was moody and serious, scarcely moving out of his absorbed gravity to receive the eager salutations of Duke, who had been greatly subdued by the melancholy of the house, and delighted to find in the advent of his parents an opening out of the gloom. John went up scowling to his wife, and, standing over her, desired that Felicie might be sent away. "I have something to say to you," he said. Letitia made herself as comfortable as circumstances would permit. She took off her cloak and hat, and had an easy chair drawn to the fire. Then she sent her maid away and turned to her husband, who had been looking on at these proceedings with impatience. "Now, what is it?" she said.

"I am glad you can attend to me at last. I want to speak to you about that poor woman and the state of the house."

"What poor woman? Do you mean Mary Hill? You can't tell me much about her, for I have seen her. Talk of cures! She is as mad as a March hare. Duke, just lock the door."

"Why should he lock the door? What I've got to

say is of importance. Don't let us have any nonsense!" said John Parke."

"She is as mad—as any one ever was. If she came bursting into the room in that state—I should die. I know I should die."

"They said she was quite quiet," he cried.

"And so she is! very quiet. John, she said she was the Dowager and that I was Lady Frogmore."

"Then you know," said John, "though that was not how they told me. They say she remembers nothing about the little boy. She declares she never had any child; that he is a little boy who was invited to play with Duke; and that Frogmore took a fancy to him and adopted him. Letitia, it's the most wonderful thing I ever heard of, and very exciting to people in our position. Do you hear me? What do you think? Was such a thing ever heard of, that a woman should forget she had a child? I never heard of such a thing. Do you think——?" He looked at her with eyes full of excitement, full of awakened anxiety, and a hundred questions. John Parke was not a clever man; he had never pretended to be: but he had boundless faith in his wife's cleverness, and he brought her this extraordinary question with an unhesitating confidence in her power to draw something out of it that would be somehow to his advantage and that of the family. He fixed his eyes upon her with all the fervour of a question of life and death.

"Oh, I know that," cried little Duke. "Aunt Mary is Mar's mother, ain't she, mamma? But she says she never heard of him. She says she don't know him. *And she's* his own mother! I laughed till I thought

I should have dropped. Fancy, mamma; Aunt Mary! And Mar laughed too," the boy said; but added in another moment in a subdued tone, "He was going to cry, but I made him laugh. He's a very little thing; he doesn't always see the fun."

Neither of his parents paid any attention to Duke, though they let him have his say. But John Parke, who had never taken his eyes from his wife's face, standing over her waiting for her decision on the question he had put before her, now touched her on the shoulder, recalling her to herself and what he had asked. "Eh?" he said interrogatively. "Letitia—don't you think——"

"No!" she said suddenly, when this little by-play had been twice repeated, "I don't. Nothing can be made of it. The child was born in this house in everybody's knowledge; put in the papers—as public as if he had been a prince. No! Don't ask me what I think. There's nothing to be thought or said on the subject. She's mad; that is all."

"But they all say she is not mad—and she says she never had a child. She ought to know," said John. "Who should know if she doesn't? Letitia, when I think—if it hadn't been for her, you and I would have been coming home here; we should have had everything. And what if, after all, there's been some mistake, some delusion? Frogmore—poor old fellow, I wouldn't say a word against him; but he was prejudiced. If she says he adopted the boy——Well! She ought to know——"

"Don't be a fool, John Parke," cried his wife. "Frogmore was proud of him, as you know. He hated me. He would never have married Mary Hill but to have

his revenge on me. Do you think I don't feel it, her set up in my place? And wouldn't I turn that brat to the door if I could, oh! without a moment's thought. But I'm not a fool," said Letitia. "The woman's mad —she doesn't know what she's saying. There's dozens of witnesses to prove it if she denies. The doctor and the nurse and all the servants in the house, and her mother, and—we needn't go further—myself. John Parke, don't be a fool. You'll never get the better of her in that way."

"All the same," said John, who had recovered the first dismay caused by her contradiction while she went on speaking. "All the same, I think it's worth fighting —with the mother at your back."

"The mother!" she said, with contempt. "She'd go raving mad in the witness-box, and that would be fine proof for you. Why, the child was born before all the world, so to speak, like the heir to the crown. You might as well fight the one as the other. Oh, it is not from any love of them, you may be sure, that I speak!"

"I don't understand you, Letitia," said John. "I'd fight it to the last, if it was any good: but as for turning the child out of doors or so forth as you talk in your wild way——"

"You would leave me to do that," said Letitia, with a snarl, "and so I should, and never think twice either of him or his mother. Duke, what do you mean staring at me like that? You don't understand what we're talking about. Run away and play. Go to the nursery or wherever you live when you're here."

"*Mamma*, Mar's quite a little fellow; he doesn't

know very much: but he's a very nice little fellow. If it is Mar you and papa are going to turn out of the house——"

Letitia burst into a shrill laugh. She pushed her boy away from her.

"Go off to your play, you little——dunce," she said. "Mar! why, Mar's the master of the house, don't you know: he's Lord Frogmore. It's we that Mar will turn out of the house if we don't mind. You had better go and ask him to be kind to papa, and not send us away."

Father and son looked on with equally bewildered faces at this burst of merriment, which they could not understand.

"I am sure," said Duke, "that Mar would be very fond of papa if he'd let him, and never, never think of turning anyone away. Mar is—why, Mar is—Mamma! Mar's father's dead, and his mother has forgotten him, and he's a very, very little boy."

Duke's eyes filled with tears, his lips began to quiver; the thought of Mar's loneliness and a vague sense of unkindness and danger around him went to the child's heart. The effect of Duke's emotion on his two parents was very different. Letitia gave her son a look of exasperation, as if she would have liked to strike him; but John's countenance melted, and his hand unconsciously placed itself with a caress on the boy's shoulder. John's obtuse mind had taken what he heard *au pied de la lettre,* and the idea that "the little boy" might after all be an impostor, and his own rights intact, had inflamed his mind. But he had no unkindly feeling to little Mar, and the tears in Duke's eyes were not only a reproach

to his father, but melted at once the untimely, artificial frost in John's heart.

"God forgive me," he said, "I didn't think of the poor child at all. I was thinking only—Poor little boy! Duke, my fine fellow, you're right to stand up for him. You make me ashamed of myself. We'll do what we can to make it up to the poor little fellow, Duke!"

"Yes, father!" cried Duke, putting his hand into John's hand.

Letitia looked from one to the other more exasperated than ever. Her lip curled, in spite of herself, over her set teeth like the snarl of a dog. Had there been a thunderbolt handy and within her reach, how unhesitatingly she would have aimed it at those two fools! "I think you'd better go and comfort your friend," she said. "Take care of him, Duke, he may be a good friend to you another time: for you're nobody, don't you know, and he is Lord Frogmore. For goodness sake, John, send the boy off and lock the door after him. I've got a hundred things to say."

John did as he was told, with the clouds closing over his face again. He had fired his shot, so to speak, and having failed had nothing more on his side to suggest.

"It is a little difficult," said Letitia, "to know where to have you, when one moment you are ready to take on trust a mad-woman's denial of a truth that is as well known as the Prince of Wales—and the next are shedding tears over the poor little boy."

"I don't see why one might not do both," said John.

"*No;* consistency doesn't matter much, does it? But

putting sentiment aside, I should like to know what's going to be done."

"I haven't heard much—how could I?" said John. "There's no will but one made before the child was born—leaving the mother guardian—of course, if she's mad, as you say, she can't be that now, I suppose."

"What does the doctor say?"

"The doctor says two or three things—as they all do—that she's quite well, not mad at all, though of course it has a strange appearance that she should have forgotten her child, and would go against her in a court of law. But he thinks it is quite natural, by all kinds of reasons," said John hurriedly, perceiving, as so few speakers are clever enough to do, that he no longer had the ear of his audience. He gave Letitia a look half affronted, half anxious, and then began to walk up and down the room, awaiting her reply.

"Five years old," said Letitia, "a little puny thing with no stamina, and the mother out of the question, taking no interest——"

"Poor little thing," said John.

"And after Mary—you are the guardian, I suppose."

"Letitia!" he cried. There was something in the tone with which she had said these words—something indescribable, hideous, which horrified him. He turned upon her with staring eyes.

"Well," she said calmly, "is there anything wonderful in that? I suppose you will be guardian as the next after her. He will be—in your hands——"

"Where he will be as safe," John cried, coming up

to her almost as if he would have seized and shaken her, "as if he were my own."

"I never doubted it," Letitia said.

What did she mean? her husband looking down upon her from where he stood, could not accuse her of anything. The words had been simple enough. And she was now holding her foot to the fire, as if the only thing she cared for in the world was to get warm. She did not look at him. She yawned a little as if the conversation were getting tedious. "You see yourself," she went on, "that there's no use trying to unseat the boy because of his mother's wild fancies. The thing you have to think of is how to do the best for him. And you'll have to take this into consideration at once. I should say we'd better come here and let Greenpark. It will be best for the boy; and as I suppose you will have a great deal to do with the property it will be better for you. There is a long minority to look forward to, and of course there must be a good allowance for the child. It would be better for Mary that she should have the Dower-house. The boy can't be any pleasure to her, feeling as she does, and it will be good for him to have children about him instead of being brought up like a little old man."

"You seem to have got it all cut and dry," said John, astonished.

"Yes. I've been thinking about it," said Letitia. "You need not speak of it all, cut and dry as you call it, at once, but it's best to have a plan in our heads. That's what I advise. And as soon as the funeral is over the first thing to do is to get rid of Mary. I am

very much frightened of mad people. I have always been so all my life."

"Well, perhaps it might be the best way. But there is Blotting to consult. Blotting has as much to say as I have. He's executor too. And so is she for that matter."

"John," said Mrs. Parke. "She is much better out of the house. And all those Hills. I can't bear them. If she keeps on thinking it an interloper, only adopted by Frogmore, she might do some harm to the child. It's not consistent with your duty to keep her here."

She looked up as she said this and met his eyes. There was a half smile in hers, but Mrs. Parke's eyes were not expressive—they were dull eyes, and when Letitia chose they became duller still with no meaning in them at all. Perhaps she had not any meaning. The tone which frightened her husband might have been an accidental change of her voice. He looked at her with all the penetration there was in his, but could make nothing of her. John had been very much frightened, he could not tell how; for, as a matter of fact, it was he who had entertained ideas prejudicial to little Mar and not Letitia. What dreadful thing had he imagined about his wife? "You are the guardian." There could not be simpler words. Was it some suggestion from the devil that had made him hear in them something—that was too dreadful to be spoken? John Parke, who was honest enough, and could not have harmed anyone, though he would have fought tooth and nail for his rights, looked into his wife's face, and saw nothing there that gave any warrant for what he had imagined. But after the shock he had received

it was not very easy for him to continue the conversation. He said, "I beg your pardon," thrusting one of his hands into his pocket, as if to find the solution of the mystery there. Letitia did not ask why he begged her pardon. She begged him to call Felicie, that she might get a cup of tea.

CHAPTER IV.

It was said by everybody that nothing could be more pathetic than Lord Frogmore's funeral. When a man dies over seventy he is usually attended to his grave, if he has been a good man, by much respect and reverential seriousness, but not by any acute feeling; but there was something in the aspect of the little boy whom John Parke led by the hand after the old man's coffin which went to the hearts of the bystanders. Poor little boy! an interloper if ever there was one, a being unnecessary, who never ought to have been born. It is needless to say that this was not the popular sentiment. The village folks gaped after the little lord with a partiality and sympathy partly made up of compassion for him, and partly of admiration for his great good fortune. A little thing like that! and already a great lord. People of another class, however, entertained different feelings. The man of business, who was his other guardian, looked at little Mar with a troubled pity that had a little impatience in it. Poor little man! Why on earth had he ever been born? Nobody wanted him. He stood horribly in the way of John Parke and all his sturdy children. It was not at all surprising if John felt it so, and certainly Mrs. John did. There could be no doubt on that subject. They had married

on the strength of that inheritance, which nobody ever doubted, and he had been his brother's heir presumptive all his life. Who wanted this little thing? If even his mother had been fond of him, had taken some pride in him! But she threw him off altogether. The poor little forlorn creature with his little pale face! He was in everybody's way. But for him John Parke would have come tranquilly into his kingdom, the inheritance which he had expected all his life, which had been his right. There was scarcely anybody, Mr. Blotting thought, who would not be glad if the child were removed to a better world. "If the Lord would take him," that was what poor people said of their superfluous children. The lawyer could not but think with a feeling not so pious that this would really be the best way. The event would break his aunt's heart perhaps, but what does it matter if a middle-aged unmarried woman, an old maid, should chance to break her heart? And to everybody else it would be a relief. "They'll never rare him," was what the village gossips said. Mr. Blotting had not the slightest doubt that Mrs. John Parke would do the best she possibly could to "rare" Mar, though it would be much against her interest. But what a saving of trouble, what a clearing up of difficulties, if only the Lord would take him. Poor unnecessary child! the old man's plaything, now nothing but a trouble and hindrance, what to him were all the good things to which he had been born? Nobody wanted him to be born, not even his mother it appeared; and the best thing for him would be to slip away out of life and be heard of no more.

Mar had a very white serious little face, and watched

every detail of the funeral service with a strange earnestness. He clutched fast hold of his uncle's hand as he stood gazing, wondering, not knowing what it was all about. To associate the ominous blackness of that coffin, which was the central object in the dismal scene, with his old kind father, was beyond Mar's powers. He took a great interest in it, how it was to be got down into the hole, and even stepped forward eagerly, dragging John a step or two to see how it was done, which gave some of the bystanders the idea that the poor little precocious lad was about to throw himself into the grave of his father, and made several take a hasty step towards him to rescue the child. Poor little thing—and not such a bad business either if it could be done—if the Lord would take him. The village people, too, thought it would be a great thing if the Lord would take him. He never would be reared they were sure; and what with his mother, poor lady, who was mad, and his father, who was dead, there was little prospect of any comfort or petting, such as his forlorn orphanhood required, for poor little Mar.

Mary went to the church, though it was considered by Mrs. Hill that it was more decorous that she should not be able to follow the mournful little procession to the grave, and it was not practicable to shut her out afterwards from the assembly of the mourners, before whom the will was read. She came in looking perhaps better than she had ever looked in her life before, in the imposing black and white of her widow's weeds—that dress which it is so common to decry as hideous, but which is almost always advantageous to its wearer. She was pale and grave, but had that air of soft ex-

haustion and almost repose which so often follows a grief which is natural, but not impassioned or excessive. The tears came easily to her eyes, her lips occasionally trembled, and her voice broke; but she was quite composed and quiet, guilty of no exaggeration or extravagance of mourning. She came in with her own party surrounding and supporting her—the vicar first of the group, the doctor bringing up the rear with the apologetic air of a man who knows he is not wanted, yet is conscious of a certain right to come. The two factions, so to speak, kept instinctively on different sides of the room, and the vicar and John Parke had a momentary silent struggle for the commanding position in front of the fire which both aimed at. When the one saw the intention of the other he involuntarily hesitated and fell back a step, so that there was first a mutual withdrawal from the coveted place; and then it came simultaneously into the minds of both that to give up this advantage out of mere politeness was unnecessary in the position in which they now stood to each other, so that both began to advance again, as if by a word of command. But if John Parke was more nimble, being younger, the vicar carried more weight, and with a sweep of his large shoulder pushed on, before the other's attitude was secure. The result was therefore to the advantage of the vicar in this brief preliminary encounter. Mrs. John had placed herself in a comfortable chair near the fire, with her handkerchief and smelling-bottle ready. Mary was more in the open, so to speak, with her mother seated near; Agnes standing by her chair, and the doctor behind. There was little remark as Mr. *Blotting read* and expounded the will, to which, indeed,

no one paid very much attention. They were all tolerably acquainted with its scope and conditions before.

"The chief point to be settled," said the man of business, "as circumstances may make certain of the late lord's stipulations impossible, is the future custody and care of poor little Lord Frogmore. I think it may all be managed amicably among us, which would be so much better than any public interference with what the testator wished. I feel sure he would prefer that we should carry out the spirit of his instructions in good intelligence among ourselves."

"Mr. Blotting," said Lady Frogmore, "may I be allowed to speak?"

She was the only one to whom the will had been at all new, and she had received it with little gestures of assent and nods of her head.

"Surely, Lady Frogmore, whatever you may wish to say."

"It is just this," said Mary. "I agree in all my dear lord says. If there had been—a child— These things," she said with an old-maidenly blush dying her countenance for a moment, "have always, I believe, to be taken into consideration; but there was, you see, no child——"

"Not when the will was written: but a prospect of one, Lady Frogmore."

"People don't make settlements upon prospects," said Mary with a gleam of shrewdness. "Do you think he would have left it like that, if it had come to anything? My dear lord was far more careful of my com-

fort than that. It is clearly understood, then, that there was no child?"

"Not then," said Mr. Blotting.

"Not then," said Mary, "nor ever. Why, what time was that?"

The lawyer read out the date, "Nearly six years ago."

She had been unmoved by the other details, but started slightly at this.

"Six years! We have not been married—half that time——"

"Oh, yes, my dear Mary," said Mrs. Hill; "going on for seven years. You see you have been so long away, such a long time away—more than five years."

"My dear," said the vicar, "never mind about dates. Mary must be kept quite calm——"

She glanced round, with a wondering, troubled look.

"Five years! Why!" She burst into a little laugh. "I to be away from my dear old lord for five years! Mother, you must be dreaming. But let us return to the other subject. I have a statement to make, which is very serious. I think I have a right to be heard, for no one can know as well as me. I have always been disturbed ever since I was married by the thought of any harm that might happen to Letitia and her family through me. You all know that. Well! Please let everybody listen to me; it is very, very important. My great comfort in my dear lord's death is this—that everything of that kind has been mercifully averted. You think me very calm, seeing how much I have lost. *Oh, no one* can tell what I have lost—the kindest, the

dearest! He was old, but that only made us suit each other the better—for you know I was not young. But my comfort in it all is this—that no harm has been done. I don't understand your talk about a child. John Parke, my husband's brother, is of course Lord Frogmore; and Letitia is Lady Frogmore: and I am the Dowager; that is all as plain as daylight. And," said Mary, rising, her eyes full of tears, her gesture full of dignity, "if they think I grudge it they are very, very wrong. I wish them a happy life and long, long years to bear their new name; and my own comfort in losing my dear lord is that no harm has been done to them."

She made this long speech with the air of a queen giving up her throne, and with a smile through her tears turned away, taking her sister's arm, who stood crying silently, not saying a word. The doctor hastened forward from behind to offer his support, but Mary put him away. "No, thank you, doctor," she said; "I am quite well. I want no help." She turned to the audience who were silent, struck dumb, not venturing even to look at each other in the awe of the strange communication she had made them. "I need not stay longer?" she said. "No, I could not help to settle anything; but whatever you arrange I will do." It was John Parke who hurried forward to open the door for her. He took her hand as she passed him and gave it a close grasp. He was strangely disturbed, and moved, in a way Mary was very far from understanding. "Lady Frogmore," he said, "whether you know it or not, and however hard it may be, I'll do my duty all the same." "I never doubted it," she said; "you were always kind; and God bless you, Lord Frogmore." John fell

back as if he had received a blow. He went back slowly to the rest, who were all silent, not even Letitia finding courage enough to make any remark. John looked at the vicar again as if he would have liked to oust him from his place; but finally, finding that too much to undertake, flung himself down into a low but very comfortable chair by the fire. "Well," he said, looking round, "here is just as strange a business as ever I met with. Blotting, what do you think?"

His voice broke the spell which had lain upon them all.

"I don't see what there is to think," said Letitia. "What did you expect? Sense from a woman who is as mad as a March hare."

"It ill becomes you, Tisch," said Mrs. Hill, who had been gasping for an opportunity, "it ill becomes you, who drove her to it, to speak of my Mary in that way."

Mrs. John Parke gave a stare in the direction of the vicar's wife, and then, turning to the two gentlemen, shrugged her shoulders a little and elevated her eyebrows.

"It is in the family," she said.

Mr. Blotting, like most other men, feared a passage of arms between the two ladies, so he hastened to put himself in the breach.

"In ordinary circumstances," he said, "a statement of this kind from a mother would be considered conclusive. If she said, 'This child is not mine,' there would not be another word to say."

"But, I beg—I beg," said the vicar, wagging his *white beard,* and see-sawing with his hand. "Nothing

of the sort—nothing of the sort! Lady Frogmore entertains a hallucination. Such a thing has happened to many at a delicate time of life. Where is Dr. Brown? he will tell you. Why, the boy, sir, the boy—is undoubted— Why, my wife was there!"

"I am ready," said Mrs. Hill, "to be examined before any court in England. I was present from the moment things began. Her mother! Of course, I was with her—I never left her. Why, it was I who received the child—I saw him born. I——"

"Spare us, please, the details. These gentlemen are not old women," said Letitia. "We, who are most concerned, don't question the fact. We may have our own opinion; we may think that of all the base, foul designs, to marry an old doting fool of a——"

"Letitia!" said John, springing up (which was no small effort) from his low chair.

"And if she went wrong in her head," cried Mrs. Hill, with gleaming eyes. "Who drove her to it? Oh, how dare you speak, you bad woman! You tried it first at home at Grocombe to drive her off the marriage—and then the day, the very day before the child was born. Oh, perhaps, you don't think I remember—but I remember everything, everything! The very day, Mrs. Parke—the afternoon: and little Mar was born in the middle of the night, the same day, so to speak. She came pretending to see how Mary was—and, oh, what she did or what she said I can't tell, but my Mary never held up her head again. It is all her doing, all! I am ready to swear—before any court——"

"Ladies, ladies!" said Mr. Blotting. "When you begin to *quarrel* there's nothing can be done. Of course,

you blame each other. It's always so—but what good does it do? Lady Frogmore is quite well now, my dear madam, you must be thankful for it, except this hallucination."

"Which is a hallucineth—whatever you call it," cried the angry mother. "Though in one way it's the truth, poor lamb—for she never saw him, never looked at him, never knew she had a child. She was driven frantic before ever he was born, and that woman did it, and meant to do it, and came on purpose. She hoped to have killed the child—that is what she wanted—before he was born."

"Letitia!" cried John Parke again, looking at her with a white threatening face which cowed her spirit, though she despised him.

"Oh, if you choose to believe what they say!" It was good for Mrs. John that she was cowed and sat motionless in the chair, which seemed to give her a sort of support and shelter, and an air of composure and self-command in which in reality for the moment she had failed. She was afraid of John, her docile husband, for the first time in her life; and she was afraid of this accusation which she knew to be true.

"We did not wish to say anything about it," said the vicar, wagging his head. "I would not have it mentioned, being a member of the family: but that is the truth about Lady Frogmore."

"Come, come," said Mr. Blotting, "in families there are always these mutual recriminations. I say it's your fault and you say it's mine. Come, come! don't you think this has gone too far? Madness is a visitation of *God.* I don't ask if it's in the family, but a person



must be much off their balance, my dear lady, that can be upset altogether by an angry visitor. We can't entertain that, you know! Come! what we have got to decide is what's to be done about this poor little boy."

Poor little Mar! If the Lord would take him. That would be so much the best solution of the question.

CHAPTER V.

AGNES HILL had given herself entirely up to her sister in these latter days. There had been nothing at all remarkable about Miss Hill in the former portion of her life. She had never been so attractive as Mary, or so sweet: a good clergyman's daughter—very thoroughly acquainted with the needs of the parish, and ready at any moment to respond to the call of those who were in need—but no more. However, in her later development many new faculties had appeared in Agnes. She had become a mother to little Mar; a mother with all the devotion of maternity, but with something of the reason of the unmarried woman, whose instinct it is to keep in the background and not to show her feelings. She was, indeed, all the mother little Mar had ever known, but she made no claim upon the first of his affections, always directing them, indeed, towards his adoring father, suppressing herself entirely in favour of Lord Frogmore as the most self-denying of mothers could not have done. And since Mary arrived, and the horror of the discovery that Mary, though sane, was unconscious of the great event of her life—the birth of her child—had burst upon the family, Agnes had devoted herself *entirely* to her sister. She had, perhaps, as most people *have*, a secret conviction that her own exertions might

bring about that in which no one else had succeeded: that she would surely be able to seize the right moment to bring forgotten circumstances to Mary's mind, to convince her of that in which it was so strange to think she could require conviction—in the reality of her child's existence. Agnes had been accordingly her sister's anxious companion during these days; but she had as yet made no attempt to move her. She had quieted as much as she could Mrs. Hill's indiscreet remonstrances. She had watched over Mary's tranquillity and peace, saving her from every disturbance. But when she led Lady Frogmore away from that assemblage of the family, it appeared to Agnes that her time had now come. An hour or two passed during which Mary was soothed and comforted in a natural paroxysm of grief by her anxious sister. But in the evening she was better, composed and ready to talk. The nurse of whom Agnes felt no need was sent away. Mrs. Hill had been persuaded that she was over-fatigued and had much better go to bed early after the great strain of the day. The vicar, on the other hand, had been recalled to the necessity of looking over his sermon, as he had to return to his parish before the next Sunday. Thus the two sisters were left alone. "You will make Mary go to bed," was Mrs. Hill's last charge. "Oh, yes, I will make her go to bed," said Agnes—but in reality her mind was full of other things.

"There is one thing," said Lady Frogmore, "that we must settle soon, and that is where we are to live. It is wonderful how little familiar it feels to me here. Now that my dear lord is gone I don't seem as if I know this place. He was all that made it feel like home."

"It is not wonderful you should think so," said Agnes, "you have been so little here."

"Only all the time I have been married," said Mary, with a faint, uneasy smile.

"No, my dear, only a year and a half, at first. It is five years and more since you were taken away."

"I don't know what you mean," said Mary; "but I am not able to argue, and you are all in a story, as if you wanted to make me believe—— You think I will feel it so much—I know that is your motive. You think that to give up my house and be only the Dowager, while Letitia is here——"

"Mary, you must try to open your eyes to the real state of affairs: why shouldn't you stay here—with your boy? He ought to be brought up in his own house."

"Agnes, will you torment me too? Did Frogmore say that? Did he want me to pretend—oh, no! no! My dear old lord would never have done so—for he was true, as true as steel."

"My poor dear, it is you who are not true—you have been so ill, Mary—you have been away for a long, long time. You were driven into it at the time you were so weak, just before the baby was born. Try and throw back your mind, oh, Mary, dear. Don't you recollect when the baby was coming? when you were all so happy, dear Frogmore the most of all. Mary, think! when the baby was coming——"

Mary's pale face flushed. She shook her head. "I never wished it," she said. "Oh no, I never wished it—to ruin little Duke and do Letitia all that harm——"

"Letitia! who did her best to kill you—who came *when you* were weak, and reproached you, and said—

horrible things. Mary, Mary, rouse yourself! Do not let her succeed in her bad, bad intent. She hoped the baby would die. And almost as well if he had, poor child," cried Agnes, in the petulance of her misery, "when his mother disowns him. His father is dead, and his mother has forgotten him. Oh, poor child, poor child!"

This did not move Mary as she had hoped. She said sadly, "Yes, I know, Letitia was not very kind. But it was not wonderful. If I had been the means of keeping her husband and her children out of the title —out of their inheritance. Would you have taken it better, Agnes? I should not—if I had had children——"

Her voice shook a little. "I do remember a time when I suppose there were hopes—and I felt very happy for a moment—and dear Frogmore——"

"Yes," said Agnes, anxiously.

"But it all went off. I have been thinking of that all the time, while you have been saying such strange things. I fainted or something, and there was an end of it. I think I was sorry after: but I'm glad now not to have done any harm to Letitia and her boy."

"Oh, Mary! if you were to see your boy, your own boy! and hear him call you mother, don't you think that would bring things back to your mind?"

"If I had a boy, Agnes," said Lady Frogmore with a faint, half-reproachful smile, "I should not want that; but you know I never had a child."

"O, my dear, my dear!" cried Agnes, wringing her hands.

"You may be sorry, but that doesn't make any difference. *If we could* change things by being sorry——"

not that I am sorry," said Lady Frogmore, "my only comfort is that my marriage and all that, which she disliked so, has done Letitia no harm."

"She disliked it very much. Oh that is far too gentle a way of putting it! she said dreadful things to you, Mary."

"Did she? don't make me think of them. I am quite in charity with her now. Poor Letitia, she needn't look reproachful any longer. She has got all she wanted now."

"Mary," said Agnes, "you are mistaken. It is your little boy that is Lord Frogmore."

"Tut, tut," said Mary, with an impatient movement of her hands, "you go on like that only to worry me. Of course, I should always be kind to him if my dear lord adopted him. But adoption can't go so far as that. No, no. I am tired of hearing of this child. Let's speak of him no more."

"Mary, if it were to be proved to you—by eye-witnesses—that he was your child?"

"Proved to me!" cried Lady Frogmore. "Should not I myself be the chief witness?"

Her smile was so perfectly satisfied in its faint indulgent compassion for her sister's folly, and the look of uneasiness with which she turned from this perpetual repetition of a disagreeable subject was so natural that Agnes' heart sank. "I think I must go to bed," she added. "It has been a hard day, and even though one does not sleep, lying down is always a rest."

"Shall I read to you, Mary, till you go to sleep?"

"No, my dear. Go to sleep yourself, Agnes. We shall *both* be better quiet. It will be another life to-morrow,"

said Mary, dismissing her sister with a kiss. Poor Agnes went away with a heart almost too sick and sad for thought. She had failed more miserably than the rest. And she did not know now what to say or do; or whether it was best to make no further attempt, to leave everything to the action of time and the guidance of events. It is more easy to adopt the most laborious or heroic measures than to take up this passive plan of operation, and it cost Agnes a great deal to relinquish the effort to set her sister right. Would she ever learn what was right? Would she ever come to a true knowledge of what had passed? or if she did, would the discovery be accompanied by a convulsion which would again rend her life in pieces? That possibility must always be taken into consideration. At present Mary was perfectly sane, and as composed in her gentle thoughts as anyone could be. But if she were urged beyond measure; if this great fact which she ignored were to be rudely pressed upon her, what might happen? Her recovery was still new, her mind fresh fledged, so to speak; too feeble to take many flights. But how to be patient and bear with this Agnes did not know. Those who have to deal with a persistent delusion have need for double patience. It is so difficult not to think that there is perversity in it, or that the deceived person could understand if he would.

Agnes went up to the nursery and bent over Mar's little crib, and dropped a kiss upon his forehead as soft as the touch of any mother. The child opened his eyes without anything of the startled effect of sudden waking, as if he had only shut his eyes in play. "Why do you say *poor child?*" he asked in his little soft voice.

"Oh, my little Mar, my little Mar!" cried Agnes: and then she scolded him a little for being awake, and bade him shut those big eyes directly and go to sleep. This visit did not dry her tears, or make it more easy to think what she was to do. Indeed Agnes was less and less reconciled to the idea of submitting to Mary's delusion as she thought it over. It would all have been so very easy otherwise! They might have lived the two together, mother and aunt, in the familiar house of which she had grown so fond during these five years, taking care of the little heir until he was old enough to go to school. His mother was his natural guardian, and so she would have been had it not been for this. It would almost have been better, Agnes thought with bitterness, if she had not recovered at all—if she had still remained with Dr. Marsden. For who could tell what the Parkes might do? They would have the power in their hands. They might insist on having her removed again. They might say that still she was not sane: and to prove that a woman was sane who had forgotten the very existence of her child, how difficult would that be? Agnes was the only one in the great house who could not sleep that night. She was sorry, very sorry, too, for the loss of old Frogmore. He had been to her a kind companion, a confiding and respectful brother, and she missed him—more than anyone else who mourned for him. The thought that he was gone and taken away, and that now there would be a clearing out of all his drawers, a searching into all his secrets, his papers examined, his very wardrobe turned inside out, brought tears of sorrow, mingled with a sort of angry dismay, to her eyes. That too, if Mary had but been

well, would have been spared. She would have kept the old man's house sacred. Sorrow and contrariety and care, all the exasperating and irritating elements which make a position intolerable, mingled in the mind of Agnes; and she knew that she could not throw it off as intolerable, but must somehow support everything for the sake of Mary and of the poor little boy! Poor little boy! To think that he was Lord Frogmore, and that after his long minority was over he would be one of the wealthiest peers in England, the poor, little, forlorn child for whom nobody cared, was enough to make any kind woman's heart overflow with the piteousness of the contrast: and he was dear and precious to Agnes as the apple of her eye.

That day she had him carefully dressed, and led him with her to Mary to make one last attempt. She had taught him with the tenderest exactitude what he was to say. It was not very much, only "Mamma, speak to Mar; dear mamma, speak to father's little boy." Mar said it very prettily after Agnes. His great eyes, which were so large and so sad, looked wistfully into the very heart of the woman who loved him. "Speak to father's little boy." She cried herself when she heard him, and did not think that any heart could resist it. She led him into Mary's room, holding his little hand very fast to give him courage, and brought him to the side of the bed where Lady Frogmore was lying very patient and quiet, with tears in her eyes, but a faint smile upon her patient mouth. "Mary," said Agnes, "I have brought your little Mar to see you. Your own little boy. You have never given him a kiss, not since *he was a baby* in the cradle." She led him to his

mother's side, and pulled his arm to remind him of what he had to say. But Mar had forgotten, or else he was too much overawed by the sight of this strange lady who was his mother. He gazed at her with his big melancholy eyes, but he could not find a word to say. Mary did not turn her head away. She looked at him not without a little emotion. "Is this the little boy," she said, "that my dear old lord was fond of? That should always give him a claim upon me."

"Oh, he has a claim. He has a first claim," cried Agnes, "on his own account."

Mary did not risk any reply, but she put her hand upon his head and smoothed his hair, and said, "Poor little boy."

And Mar did not say a word. Not though Agnes pulled his sleeve, and touched his elbow, and did everything that was possible to jog his memory. "Mar!" she said in an emphatic and significant whisper. But not a syllable did Mar say, not even "mamma," which would have been so natural. He only stood and gazed with those large eyes that looked doubly large in his small pale face—till there remained nothing for Agnes to do but to take him away again, and to acknowledge to herself that she had failed. "Oh Mar, Mar!" she cried, when she had taken him back to his nursery; "why didn't you speak? Why didn't you say what I told you?" But even then Mar had not found his tongue, and he made her no reply.

After this there ensued a strange confused interval, during which the two executors were continually meeting *to* consult on what was to be done. They had no *right to* consult without including the third most im-

portant of all in their deliberations. But how were they to consult with Lady Frogmore, who ignored the very first particular of their trust! Nothing could be more strange than the position altogether. The vicar and his wife, who could not be shut out, and whose self-importance as her parents was so very much greater than any claimed by Mary, fought stoutly for what they considered their daughter's "rights." But Mary put in no claim of right, and was only anxious that John Parke and his wife should, as she thought, succeed to everything and take their right place. She did not ask either the custody or guardianship of the child. He had a disturbing influence upon her, confident though she was that he was none of hers, and after a while she showed a restlessness to get away, to which the doctor, who was still always in attendance, would not allow any opposition. He would not answer for the consequences, he said, if she were opposed. And thus it happened that to the extreme discomfiture and dismay of the vicar and his wife, and the despair of Agnes, the matter was settled at last. Mary left the Park, leaving behind almost with relief the forlorn little Lord Frogmore, who was her only child. She left him in the keeping of the woman who tried her best to extinguish his little life before it began, carrying away from him in her train the only creature in the world that had been to him as a mother. Alas for little Mar! But so it had to be.

CHAPTER VI.

LITTLE Mar said nothing at any time about this shock to his being, which occurred when he was so very young that his after recollection of it was of the most imperfect kind—a confused memory of pain rather than any definite recollection of facts. But there was no doubt that it had a very serious effect upon him. Such a change, from the supremacy of an only child, monarch of all he surveyed, the idol of his father and of his aunt, to whom Mar was every thing, into a mere indefinite member of a large nursery party, nobody's favourite, a little stranger whose tastes were not consulted, nor his fancies thought of—is more tremendous than anything that can happen to a man. How good for him, people said, instead of being petted and spoiled as an only child is so apt to be, to have the advantage of a wholesome nursery life with other children round him, and all the natural give and take of a large family! But such a revolution is a terrible experiment. I have known it drive a delicate child into a sort of temporary imbecility. This could not be said of Mar, for, amid all the criticisms to which he was subject, it was never alleged of him that he was without intelligence. But a great many other things were said which, whether they were true or not, had a great effect upon his after career.

For one thing, Mrs. John Parke intimated to all her friends with great regret that the little lord was exceedingly delicate, which was a thing not to be wondered at considering the age of his parents, the unfortunate tendency to nervous and mental disease in his mother's family, and the extremely injudicious way in which he had been brought up until the time when he came under her care. He was so delicate that when Mar reached the age at which other boys go to school, his aunt did not feel that she could take the responsibility of permitting him to go. She said it was his uncle who was afraid to take this step, but most people knew that Mrs. John Parke had the reigning will in the house. The situation altogether was one which the outer world did not very well understand. Lady Frogmore lived at the Dower-house, which was quite on the other side of the county, and very difficult to get at from the Park, being out of the way of railways, and requiring a very long and roundabout journey by various junctions. She was well enough to see her friends, to take a little mild share in what was going on, but her son was never with her. It was vaguely rumoured that she had taken an aversion to him during the time of the insanity, from which, as a matter of fact, most people were doubtful if she had ever recovered, while many continued to regard her with a little alarm, her sister-in-law being the chief of these. Mrs. John Parke never hesitated to express this feeling with lamentations over her own weakness. "Poor Mary," she said, "is quite well now: I know she is quite well—just as clear in her head as any of us, except that unfortunate delusion about the boy. I know it is very bad of me, but one can't help

one's nature; and I cannot get over it. She always frightens me. I keep thinking perhaps something may be said that will set her off—or something happen. I know I am very wrong, but I have such a horror of mad people. Oh yes, I know she is quite well *now:* but when that is in your nature how can one ever be sure?" Most people sympathized with Mrs. John, who betrayed to her intimates with bated breath the state of affairs between Mary and her child. "Greenpark was in many ways more convenient to us," she said, "but what could we do? We could not abandon the poor child. John was his natural guardian, and of course we all felt that wholesome quiet family life, when he would simply be one of many, was the best thing for him—the only thing to neutralize all those other dreadful influences. He is always called by his Christian name, not Frogmore, as would naturally be the case, for the same reason. It is so much better, with such an excitable feeble child, not to surround him with any sort of special distinction—time enough for that when he is a man."

"If he ever lives to be a man," Mrs. Parke's confidants would say, shaking their heads.

"Oh, for heaven's sake don't say such a dreadful thing. What should I do if he did not live to be a man? I think I should kill myself! We his next heirs, and acting as father and mother to him— Oh, no, no. If I did not believe that under all his delicacy he had a tough wiry constitution, I should never have consented to take such a charge."

But notwithstanding the tough, wiry constitution in *which she* believed, Mrs. Parke was too anxious about

her nephew to allow him to go to school. It was too exciting for him, it was too exhausting for him. With the germs, perhaps, who could tell, of madness in him, it was altogether too dangerous. And Mar accordingly grew up at home under the charge of successive tutors who rarely managed to please Mrs. Parke, or to please themselves under her roof, for long together. Either they had theories as to what was good for their pupil which did not agree with hers, or they found the life so deadly dull which they were expected to spend with Mar in seclusion, shut out from everything that might be going on, that it soon became insufferable to them. They formed quite a procession coming and going, one following the other, and as each man had, more or less, a different system, it may be supposed that poor little Mar's education did not advance in any remarkable way. What they all agreed in was a desire to get the boy into the open air, to give him the advantage of a country life, to make him hardy and active. But to this Mrs. Parke maintained a constant opposition. He was not strong enough, she said; his lungs were delicate; he could not bear the exposure and exercise which were good for the others. In summer she was obliged to relax her rules, but in winter she was obdurate, with the natural consequence that Mar caught cold more readily than anyone else in the house.

This was the position of affairs when Duke, John Parke's eldest son, came of age. Duke's majority was celebrated as if indeed it was he who was the heir. The family had by this time been so long established in the chief house of the race that they were scarcely *conscious that* it was not theirs by full right of pos-

session. Letty, the eldest girl, was nineteen; she was not quite three years older than Mar, and his champion and supporter in the family. There were two boys younger than she, and a little girl who brought up the rear—all of whom were stronger, noisier, more assuredly at home, masters and mistresses of the position, than the quiet, slim, pale boy, too long, too slight, too grave for his years, who had the habit of being pushed into the background, and never asserted himself, or took any distinctive place in the family party. The younger ones, indeed, were a little contemptuous of Mar. His delicacy, of which so much was made, his perpetual staying at home, his supposed incapacity for their sports, and indifference to their pleasures, had been part of their code all their life. There were so many things that Mar could not do. "Oh, he can't come. He'll catch cold," Reginald, who was seventeen, said scornfully when there was any question of Mar sharing their pleasures. The members of the family who stood by Mar were the two eldest, and little Mary, the youngest girl, whom her mother called Tiny, in order not to use poor Lady Frogmore's name, which John had insisted upon giving her—who made a slave of the quiet boy and found him very serviceable. The girls made Mar's life a little brighter than it would otherwise have been, and Duke when he was at home, which was not very often, was always good to his old playfellow, who looked up to him as a youth of sixteen does to one of twenty-one, with admiration and devotion.

And thus the time drew on to Duke's majority. The *preparations for* it caused a little scandal in the neighbourhood. The good people about protested to each

other that it was for all the world as if John Parke's son was the heir: but they accepted with alacrity all the same the invitations which Letitia sent forth in so liberal a way. There was to be a dinner for the farmers, who had known Master Duke all his life. There was to be a great ball to which all the county was invited, and there was a fête in the Park for the village folk and all the poor neighbours, and also for the "smart" people whose revels were of a less noisy kind. It is so much the fashion nowadays to put the poor neighbours in the foreground that this fête was Letitia's *chef d'œuvre*. The programme altogether was one by which she felt she was to distinguish herself in the county, and which would mark Duke's birthday as nothing else could do. Mrs. Parke, indeed, spoke of her son exactly as if he were the heir. She spoke of her humble guests as having seen him grow up, as taking *such* an interest in him. All the connections of the family were collected to celebrate this great event, and what was the most extraordinary of all, Lady Frogmore, who went out so little, and to whom this was in some sort a hostile demonstration, was one of the guests. There was nothing in the whole programme about which the county neighbours, the spectators who watched and criticized Letitia, were so much interested as the demeanour of Lady Frogmore. She had not appeared among them for years, her story was full of mystery, she was said to be indifferent to, if not possessed by an aversion for her own son, her only child, who lived neglected in his uncle's family. All these things gave excitement to the reappearance of the poor lady, whose pleasant ways so

many remembered with kindness, and whose life had been so strangely and so terribly overcast.

By this time the vicar of Grocombe and his wife were both dead. That Mary had been a dreadful disappointment to them, and that they had not at all approved of her conduct at the time of Lord Frogmore's death, they had not hesitated to say, and Mrs. Hill had indeed been heard to declare that it gave her husband his death-blow. He had been so much disappointed in Mary! He had felt it such a dereliction of duty on her part to leave her son in the hands of the Parkes, people about whose religious principles there was no certainty: and it had helped him to his grave to think of little Mar being brought up perhaps in the most careless way, while his grandfather was a clergyman. Whether it was this mental trouble or bronchitis that removed the vicar at the ripe age of seventy-five, it is at all events certain that he did succumb, and that his wife did not long survive him. When the new vicar was appointed, Mrs. Hill came to her daughters at the Dower-house, but she never was happy there. She kept asking daily why was Mary there and not at the Park? Why had she abandoned her child?—it was nonsense to say that she had forgotten her child! Why, why had she left Mar? which indeed were very reasonable questions, but did not promote the happiness of the house.

After her death the two sisters continued as before each other's closest companions, and now with no divided duty, save that Mary was very tranquil in her *secluded* life, and that Agnes' heart was racked with

anxiety. She kept up a little correspondence with Mar, exchanging letters full of love and longing for his schoolboy epistles, in which there was not even the animation of a schoolboy, which poor Agnes looked for with the wildest anxiety, and cried over with the deepest disappointment when they came. How should he be able to respond—that undeveloped, heart-stunned boy—to her tenderness, the tenderness of an old mother, not even young to gain his sympathy? Agnes was the one who suffered amid all these differing interests and feelings. Now and then, at long intervals, she had a glimpse of her boy, a privilege which generally left her sadder than ever. "He looks so delicate," she was even forced to allow to Letitia, who surprised her in tears after she had taken farewell of the boy. "Yes, he is very delicate," said Letitia with a grave face. "I take a hundred precautions with him which I should laugh at for my own children. But if anything were to happen to Mar in my house I should die." "Oh, God forbid that anything should happen!" cried poor Agnes. "I am sure I hope so sincerely," cried Letitia, but still shaking her head. And the same impression was universal. The old women in the village whom Agnes went to see on her visit, old pensioners, shook their heads, too, and said, "Ma'am, you'll never rare him." And the tutor who was leaving seized upon the owner of the sympathetic face and discoursed to her largely of the false system on which Mar was being trained. "He's like a flower growing in a prison—that flower, you know, that some man wrote a book about, all running to seed, and not a bit of colour for want of air and sun."

CHAPTER VII.

It was June, the brightest weather, and everything at the Park was bright. A family of five children, of whom the eldest had just attained his majority, while the others were old enough to throw themselves into the festivities with devotion, is perhaps the best background that could be supposed for any rejoicing. They all enjoyed it, and the preparations for it, and the general commotion as much, nay more, than the boy himself, who was much troubled in his mind about the speech he was told he would have to make, and still more with a vague uneasiness about the position he was made to occupy. He was, it was true, the eldest son of the family which occupied the Park, the heir and representative of his own branch, but Duke had an uncomfortable feeling about all the "fuss," as he called it, which was evidently too much. "It seems as if I were taking Mar's place," he said to his father. "Your mother thinks not," said John; but John was a little cloudy too. For one thing, however, Duke had a certain right to the commotion made about his majority. He was not in the same position as the other young Parkes. Lord Frogmore had made special provision for him when it was known that he was no longer to be the heir. Greenpark and the little estate surrounding it

had been settled upon Duke. He was a squire in his way, not merely the son of a younger son. Lord Frogmore had been exceedingly liberal to the boy who had irritated the old lord in spite of himself by his little childish brag about being the heir. These favours had been entirely for Mary's sake, whose conscience had suffered so acutely in the prospect of displacing Duke. But no one knew of that in the strange imbroglio that followed. He went now to meet the ladies at the station, a fine young fellow, with a soldierly air, for he had got his commission a couple of years before and now was quite a young man of the world, conversant with all the experiences which are so profound and varied, of military youth. Duke was not fond of Miss Hill, nor she, he was aware, of him; but he was really attached to Mary, who had been so tender to him in his childhood. He took charge of her in the most affectionate way, leaving the less important matters of the boxes, etc., to Agnes and the maid, while he took Lady Frogmore to the carriage which was waiting. "They are going to make a dreadful fuss about me," he said. "I think a great deal too much."

"How can that be, Duke, when you are the eldest son, the future head of the family?"

"Of the younger branch if you like, Aunt Mary—which doesn't mean much. What I dislike is, that it's like putting me in Mar's place."

At this Mary said nothing: but the smile died off her face, and a cloud came over her eyes which was generally the effect of anything said on this subject.

"He's pretty well," said Duke, hastily, "and as much

interested as anyone. You can't think what a generous dear little fellow he is."

"Ah!" said Lady Frogmore. She brightened up, however, and added immediately, "I hear there is to be a tenants' dinner and a ball. It will be a strange thing to me to find myself at a ball."

"No one there will look nicer," said Duke, with filial flattery. "I don't mind the ball," he added. "That's natural. Now that Letty's out and me at home, and the others all old enough to like the fuss, a ball's the best thing to have. It's the tenants' dinner that bothers me, Aunt Mary. Why should the tenants mind me? I'm nothing to them, only their landlord's cousin. And I'm sure my father thinks so too, only he will not say it."

"It is quite right," said Lady Frogmore.

"Oh, no, it is not quite right. I'm twenty-one and qualified to have an opinion. Oh, here's Miss Hill. I hope you hadn't any bother with the luggage, Miss Hill. I thought I'd better take care of Aunt Mary, and that you would rather the maid did it."

"You are quite right," said Agnes a little stiffly. "We have managed everything, and Mary always likes to have you to herself."

"Dear Aunt Mary," said Duke, squeezing her hand. "She has always been too good to me all my life."

Agnes Hill had by this time got something of the grim aspect which procures for a woman even in these enlightened days the title of old maid. She was taller and thinner than her sister, less soft of aspect and of tone than Mary, as indeed she always had been: and the sense of wrong that had over-clouded her mind for

so many years, the separation from the child to whom she had given all the love of her heart, and who needed her, she felt, as much as she longed for him, had given her a look of protest and almost defiance, as of a woman injured by the world, which is the aspect associated by a world full of levity with that title. "A sour old maid," Duke thought her, and he liked to get what he called "a rise" out of old Agnes. What a rise is, is imperfectly known to the present writer, or the etymology of the phrase, but at least it was not anything respectful. So that in this trio who now drove off to the Park there were two who loved each other dearly, and two who loved each other so little that it might be said by a little strain that they hated each other—notwithstanding that they had between them one bond of sympathy, which was certainly wanting between Duke and the relation whom he loved.

The Park was looking its best, the fresh foliage heavy as midsummer, yet still retaining some tints of spring green in the brilliant afternoon sunshine which swept in low lines under the trees. And Duke, though he objected to the fuss, could not refrain from stopping the carriage to show the ladies the great marquees prepared for the dinner next day. The workmen were busy with it, but it was sufficiently advanced to be exhibited, and Duke could not but be a little proud of the great erection, and the way everything was being done. He dragged Lady Frogmore all over it, while Miss Hill stood with an unconcealed look of indifference, if not hostility, taking no notice of anything outside. "Old Agnes's" opposition almost reconciled Duke to the "fuss" he disliked, and cleared all his objections away.

They were received by Letitia at the door which was a great mark of honour to her sister-in-law: but she too gave Agnes the slightest of welcomes, letting her hand drop as soon as she had touched it, and turning away to conduct Lady Frogmore upstairs, as if she had no other guest. The whole family, indeed, clustered about Mary, conveying her in triumph to the room where tea awaited her, and leaving Miss Hill as if she had been the maid, in the hall, to follow at her leisure. Perhaps Duke, though he supposed himself to hate Agnes, was moved by a sense at least of the rudeness of his family, for he separated himself from the little crowd and hung about as if waiting for the unwelcome visitor who was left out.

"You don't need," he said, with an uneasy laugh, "to be shown the way?"

"No," said Agnes. "I once knew it well enough: but a visitor whom nobody wants always requires to be shown the way. Oh never mind. I don't care. Tell me where I shall find Mar?"

"He was not with the rest?" said Duke, uneasy still.

"No, he was not with the rest. Do you know," said Agnes Hill, "it would be better taste in your position not to count him up with the rest, and to call him by his proper name—Frogmore."

"He is one of the family," said Duke, reddening. "We never think of him as anything else."

"All the same," said Miss Hill, "though he may be one of the family, he's not the last or the youngest, but the chief person in the house: and his proper name is Frogmore."

"I knew," cried Duke, "as soon as I heard you were

coming, that you'd try to sow discord between Mar and the rest! Not with me," the young man added proudly. "Nobody could make Mar think that I didn't give him his due. Thank heaven he knows me!"

Agnes' grey eyes, which were full of fire, softened in spite of her. "I couldn't do you wrong, Duke," she said, "though you're too much in my boy's place to please me. I believe you've always been good to him. Yes, I do: though it was a bad day for him when he was left here."

"You've no right to say so," said Duke, who had been half softened too, and now flashed up again in wrath with the moisture still in his eyes.

"We needn't quarrel," said Miss Hill. "Can you tell me where I shall find him? Your mother's tea would choke me. I want to see my boy."

"I don't know why he didn't come," said Duke, confused. "He will be in the old schoolroom as he wasn't there."

"Oh, I know very well why he didn't come! It needs no wizard to tell that. Poor child, poor child! He will scarcely know even me," said Agnes, as if that were the climax of all misery. She gave Duke a little nod, in which there was some anxiety, notwithstanding the opposition, and went hurriedly upstairs. The children's apartments were on the second floor, and Agnes, who was spare and slight as a girl, ran up the long staircase as if she had been sixteen. The old schoolroom was at the end of the corridor, a long bright room which overlooked the park. Agnes knocked at the door, her heart beating with many emotions. "Come in," said the broken voice, a little hoarse and uncertain, of

a boy who had lost the angelical *timbre* of childhood. He was sitting, a long, slim figure, slight as could be, a mere sheath for the spirit, as some boys who grow very fast appear, huddled up in an easy chair, and bent over a table. A long window behind him made his form at first invisible to his anxious visitor; he was nothing but a dark silhouette against the light: and when he sprang up surprised to see a lady enter, the slightness and angularity of the long, straight, yet stooping figure without shape save that most undesirable one given by the contraction of the shoulders and the stoop of the head, made the heart of Agnes sink in her breast. He stood swaying from one foot to another, shy and doubtful. He did not know her at first, which she had anticipated, but which chilled her no less. "Mar!" she said, rushing forward. He stammered and hesitated, she did not know with what feeling—and looked behind as if expecting some one beside. It was not till long after that Agnes realized what the boy had thought. "Aunt Agnes!" he said with an almost shrill tone in his broken voice.

"Oh, Mar, you know me still, God be thanked for that! I thought you must have forgotten me altogether. But, dear, why are you up here, when everybody but you goes to welcome the guests? You are the head of the house, Mar. Nobody can be welcome here that is not welcome to you."

"Do you think so?" he said with a laugh. "No, no, that would be foolish at my age. I have no visitors—they are all for the others; who should come to visit me?" he said again.

"Your mother, Mar," said Miss Hill—"and an old

aunt that perhaps you don't make much account of, but who thinks constantly of you."

"Oh, as for you, Aunt Agnes!" cried the boy—"but my mother—what do I know of my mother?—will she look at me when she sees me?—I suppose she must see me while she is here?"

"Mar," cried Agnes, "there is a change coming in your mother. I am sure of it. She is beginning to think of things. She knows now that there is something wrong. We must be patient, my dear, and keep on the watch. It has been a long, long time coming; but I am sure she begins to feel that something is wrong."

"It is a long time coming, as you say; and it does not seem very much when it comes," said the boy. "One only gets to understand the strangeness of it as one grows older; but never mind, I have got on very well without her hitherto, and I need not trouble myself about it, need I, now?"

"I don't like you to say so, Mar."

"I am sorry myself, but it can't be helped," said the boy. "I form very different ideas in myself now and then. But the philosophical thing is never to mind. It's a little peculiar to be as I am, no one to care particularly about me, isn't it? Generally a fellow at my age has rather too much caring for, to judge by Duke. But he's exceptional. Oh, don't think I'm not cared for; I am too much cared for: Uncle John is the kindest man in the world, and as for my aunt—she kills me with kindness. Yes, that's what she does. She's far more careful about me than about the rest. I wish sometimes that my health was of no importance, like Reggie's. Well, that's what she says—'Oh, Reggie!

He's of no consequence; he has the health of a pig. But Mar!' And then I have gruel, and my feet in hot water, and must not go out. It's rather tiresome," the boy said with a yawn. "I did want to go out to-day, to see all the things, how they are getting on. Did you think there was an east wind to-day?"

"East wind! and what would it matter if there were—in June?" said Agnes Hill.

"What a revolutionary you are!" said Mar. "But it's a great refreshment to hear of someone who despises the east wind. I have to watch it; I can't help myself. Do you see that weathercock, Aunt Agnes? I look at it the first thing in the morning, for I know if it turns to the east I mustn't go out, even if the Queen were coming. It's veering round, don't you see? I've done nothing but watch it all day."

"And what does she mean by that?" cried Agnes; "what does that matter in summer, the east wind!"

"Oh, my aunt means—only care and kindness—perhaps a little more; but this you must never repeat, for it sounds hard, and I don't know whether I am right. She is dreadfully frightened lest something should happen to me in her house and she should be blamed——"

"In her house—it is your house!" said Agnes, vehemently.

"Oh, no; not while I am so young. Uncle John is my guardian, and lives here for me, and it is a great sacrifice to him. But, of course, while he is here, and I am under age, it is his house. I wish they would let me take my chance, though," said Mar, "like the rest. Do you think it matters? If a fellow is going to die,

he'll die whatever you do, and in the meantime he might as well have some good of his life."

"Do you mean yourself, Mar? Why should it be thought of, that a young creature is going to die? We must all die sometime. What you have to do is to live, and to grow up a very important man, with a great deal to do in the world."

"Aunt Letitia does not think I shall ever do that. But she does not want anything to happen to me in her house. Don't you know what that means? But don't think I care," said the boy with a pale smile. "I've thought it all over, and I believe in Christianity and I don't mind dying a bit. I hate being ill, and I hate being kept in like this and made different from the rest; but why should one mind dying? One will get into a better place; one will be saved from all possibility of going to the bad. I don't see why there should be any fuss about it, especially as there is nobody in particular to care—— Yes, I know there's you; but you see so little of me. And the girls would be very sorry. Letty, I shouldn't wonder if Letty—— But that's a poor sort of talk to amuse you with."

"Dear Mar, you break my heart."

"Why?" said the boy, "I should think you would be glad to know that whatever happens I don't mind. But Aunt Letitia," he said with a laugh, "would be in a dreadful state of mind if anything should happen—in her house."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE next morning rose in a blaze of sunshine as though everything in heaven and earth conjoined to make Duke's day of rejoicing brilliant and happy. It was the day of all others for a fête out of doors, and the hero of the occasion greatly regretted the marquee in which the dinner was to take place, and where, no doubt, the heat would be suffocating. That, and the still more terrible fact that he would have to make a speech, were the only clouds upon Duke's firmament. They kept him in a subdued state of felicity during the morning, in the course of which he retired often into private corners both indoors and out of doors to study a small manuscript which had been concocted in the schoolroom with the help of Letty and Mar, and therefore was the result of the joint youthful genius of the house. Letitia had on several occasions indicated to her son what he ought to say, and would have written his speech for him with more or less success, as she was in the habit of doing for John. But Duke had not relished his mother's aid. He had told her with great dignity that there were some things which a man ought to do for himself, and that his speech at his birthday dinner was certainly one of them—a general proposition which could not be opposed in the abstract, and to

which the fear of raising a still stronger opposition prevented Letitia from replying, that in her son's special circumstances a birthday speech was a very difficult business, and required most wary walking. Nothing could be more true, or more impossible to say to a hot-headed boy, who was utterly unconscious of the schemes and hopes for his aggrandisement which filled his mother's brain. And had she suggested to him the management of that difficult subject which would have satisfied herself, Duke she knew was capable of rushing wildly to the other side and contradicting everything she wished. The young trio in the schoolroom were quite unconscious of these wishes—even Mar, though he would betray occasionally, as he had done to Agnes, the instinct which revealed to him the precariousness of his own position, and the foregone conclusion in respect to him which existed in so many minds, was not always under the weight of that thought—and the boy did not think of himself at all when he helped in the concoction of Duke's speech. All the most eloquent sentences were Mar's—that one in particular about the attractions of the world, and the spirit of adventure, and how, though there was so much that drove him to more exciting pursuits, the needle in his heart (which was an uncomfortable way of putting this well-worn metaphor but did not trouble these young critics) always pointed to home. Mar's pale face flushed with pleasure when he read out this paragraph, the last words of which were drowned in the applauses of his companions. "Why, that's poetry," said Letty with a tear in her eye. "It's much too grand for me," said Duke, "it's splendid, old fellow!" and the mingled pleasure of the author

applauded, and of the excitement of composition, brought a flush all over the delicate boy, and forced the water to his eyes too. Mar was very manly, and would rather have died than cry like a girl—but it was too easy to bring the water to his eyes.

And who can describe the excitement which was in all their minds when the moment of fate arrived? There were some parts of Duke's speech which had been added in secret conclave between him and his sister, and of which even Mar knew nothing. The full brightness of the afternoon was still shining outside when the ladies of the family and their guests came into the marquee to hear the speeches, and the climax of the festivities was reached. When Mary came in, wearing as she always did in a modified form the dress of her widowhood, there was a breath of something like applause—a cheer subdued into a sort of sight of sympathy and regard; for Mary was one of those women who are always popular, however little or much they may do to deserve it. It was perhaps only natural that Mrs. John, who had reigned at the Park for eleven years, whereas Mary's interrupted sovereignty, during most part of which she was absent, scarcely exceeded half that period, should not like this expression of preference. But she did the wisest thing she could do in the circumstances, and appropriated as much as she could of it by drawing Mary's arm through her own, and leading her up to the chief place. Lady Frogmore nodded and smiled to all her old acquaintances, the tenants whom she knew, as she walked up through the subdued light of the tent to the head of the table; and she touched Duke on the shoulder as she passed him

with a caressing and encouraging gesture. Agnes, who came after, with a poignant sense of the boy's trouble, and of the wrong he suffered, and of the strange position altogether, laid her hand on Mar's shoulder as she passed with a consolatory touch. To Agnes it seemed all one gigantic wrong—the event and the occasion, the presence of these men, as ready to cheer one as another, to applaud whoever came before them. What right had Duke to come of age? What right had he to have a dinner given for him, to receive congratulations, as if he were a prince? Nothing satisfied Agnes, not even the natural fact of his twenty-first birthday! He seemed to take something from Mar even in reaching the age of twenty-one.

And to see him on his feet returning thanks with a flush which was half panic and half excitement, the first immense internal commotion of a boy joining the world of men, which so far as he knew was all sympathy, and taking his place as a man among the rest for the first time! Every eye was turned towards Duke, every ear intent on what was really the event of the evening, the manner in which the young master should acquit himself. Duke was undeniably the young master to all there. They knew little or nothing of the young Frogmore. He was never seen either at meet or coverside —a delicate boy fond of his book, it was said, half with respect, half with contempt, when he was spoken of at all. John and his sturdy boys filled a large place in the county, and nobody thought of the young heir. So that Duke held by a sort of prescriptive right the place and title of the young master. And he was a favourite. The farmers' faces responded. They turned to him

with the pleasure which men have in seeing a young fellow appear and take up the lines which, had they been consulted, they would have marked out for him. He was altogether of their own kind, and known to every one. It had even been murmured among the better informed what a pity it was that Master Duke was not in fact the heir! But a number more did even not think of this, and took him for granted easily. And how he did talk to be sure! About the world being all open to a young man, and full of attractions; how he himself would like to go to Africa after big game, and to India like the young princes, and in a general way everywhere to see the world, but how the needle in his heart (it was thought quite novel and a wonderful metaphor among the country people) always turned trembling to home. Duke gave Mar, who sat by him, a little slap on the shoulder, when he brought out this fine sentiment, which was received with deafening applause.

He wandered a little (it was thought by Letty, who was especially watchful, as this was the part where her own composition came in) after this, forgetting the connection of the sentences, which Letty longed to be near enough to suggest to him. But suddenly there came a change in Duke's voice. He had become aware that he had lost the thread, and that as he stumbled about among the half-forgotten words he was losing the attention of his auditors also. And with a wisdom worthy of a more experienced orator, Duke sacrificed a part of his discourse bravely to the success of the rest. There was something that must be said. With a thrill of alarm lest he should not recollect exactly how Letty

had put it, yet with an exhilarating consciousness that he knew at heart the sense of what he had to say, Duke flung back his head and plunged into that most important subject of all.

"There is one thing, however, gentlemen, that I must say ('before I conclude,' murmured Letty, under her breath). You have all given me the most glorious reception (received me with an enthusiasm I can never forget), and I must thank you for it with all my heart. But at the same time I must remind all my friends that after all I am not the true Simon Pure. ('Hear, hear,' said Letty, he had remembered the words.) You congratulate me, and you cheer what I say to you, and you look all so friendly and so kind that I—I could almost cry if I were not ashamed," said Duke, with an outburst which was certainly his own, and which brought a storm of applause, "but at the same time, gentlemen, I must remind you," he resumed, "that all the honour you do me is mine at second hand (Letty clapped her hands noiselessly to encourage and reward her brother), and that the real person who is the principal among us is my cousin, Marmaduke, Lord Frogmore. He mustn't think, and nobody must think, that I am thrusting myself into his place. He is a great deal younger than I am, and he doesn't show so much as he ought. But I can tell you," cried Duke, once more abandoning Letty, and bursting into original composition, "that if ever there was a little brick in the world, it's Mar—I mean Frogmore. And, gentlemen, now you've done me all the honours, I want you to drink his health and a happy coming of age to him. I give you Lord Frogmore."



The farmers got up on th
glasses. They shouted, "B
the unaccustomed name th
Someone burst out into "F
which rang out like a sto
"Master Duke." Duke him
ing than he had represented
near crying than was at all
and twenty. He laughed i
almost roughly turning to h
his feet to reply. The faces
head of the table were at
study. Letitia was almost gr
tion, affecting to smile, but
galvanized and affected con
human lips. Mary leant ba
alabaster, her breath coming
crimson with excitement, h
pride, mingled with shame.
his coming of age—*that* boy,
so genuine, so true in his im
dealing. It has been whis-

Mar, however, was forced on his feet, and stood up supporting himself on the table, his weakly length, notwithstanding the stoop in his shoulders, giving him a sort of ascendancy over all around him. Mar's pale countenance was flushed, he was so moved by the strange commotion in his veins and the unlooked-for position into which he was thrust, and this first demand ever made on his boyish courage and powers, that for a moment he could not open his mouth, but looked dumbly round upon the great circle of encouraging faces like an affrighted animal, a large-eyed deer or dog, not knowing what was going to be done to him. His large eyes were full of tears, through which he saw the people round him as through a mist, yet took in everything, his uncle's look of sympathy, Letty's anxious face, who sat with her hands clasped together and her lips moving, as if she would breathe into him what to say. It passed through his mind that this was so like Letty, always wanting to tell you what to say: and in the dizzy height of his excitement he half laughed at it within himself. And then he felt Duke hurting his hand, crushing it as he leant upon the table. The boy woke up and began, with a voice so seldom accustomed to hear itself speak:—

"You are very, very good to drink my health. I haven't very much health of my own, perhaps wishing for it will make it better. Thank you very much for that. I never knew that Duke meant to mention me. I am nobody beside him. He is a man, and as strong as a horse, and can do anything. I wish with all my heart I was only his little brother, and that he was Lord Frogmore. You may laugh," cried the boy, warming at

the sound, "but it is true. I have often thought, when they said I would not live, that I wished it, for then Duke would have all——"

"One moment, my lord," said one of the listeners, "if someone laughed it was to hear you call yourself his little brother—and you so tall; but there's nobody here but hopes you will live and be like your father before you—the best landlord that ever was."

"I will, if I live," cried Mar, swinging out his long thin arm with the eloquence of nature, in the midst of the quick loud chorus of assent that burst from everybody near. "I will! If there is one thing I care for in the world it's that. If I live I will; and if I don't live Duke will, so that, anyhow, this family will do its best, and God will help us. I thank you all very much," he said, after a pause. "I don't know how to say it. I thank you for being kind to me for my father's sake—" He made another pause. "And for Duke's sake, who has spoken up for me more than himself. And if he turns out your landlord after all, I shan't grudge it him for one——" Mar stood still a moment, wavering upon his long feeble limbs—and then, with a smile, burst out into the foolish chorus, that imbecility of shy enthusiasm which is all that an English crowd can find to say. There was an effort made to take it up, hindered by something in the throats of the performers at first, then bursting out in a hoarse roar, mingled with broken laughter and blowing of noses and some unconcealed tears.

When in the general excitement it was possible to think of anything else than the speeches and the very *unusual* entertainment provided for the Frogmore tenantry

by the Frogmore boys, there was a little stir at the head of the table, and it became apparent that Lady Frogmore had fainted. She was scarcely paler than she had been before, scarcely more motionless, but her sister, who had forgotten Mary for the moment, when she turned to her had found her unconscious. Indeed, for the first moment, Agnes had believed that she had lain back and died in the extraordinary sensation of this first revelation of her son. But this was not so.

CHAPTER IX.

MARY was carried to her own room, where she came to herself without agitation or apparent disturbance, asking only "Where am I?" when she recovered her consciousness and looked vaguely round, requiring to have it explained to her that she was at the Park and not at her own house, which for the moment seemed the only thing that perplexed her. Agnes, in high excitement, hoping and fearing she knew not what, but something at least which should change and reconstitute life, watched her with an anxiety scarcely more strong than the disappointment with which she became aware that nothing was going to happen. Towards night Mary informed her sister that she had been dreaming a very strange dream, something about drinking toasts, "and there was one to my dear old lord. I think it must have been Duke's birthday party that was in my head," she said. Agnes did not venture to inquire further, or to suggest that Duke's party was a reality and not a dream; but trembling with anxiety, with eagerness, with deep disappointment, had to compel herself to silence and allow her sister to rest. There is a period at which we all arrive in our deepest troubles, when we shrink from effort, when even to try to set matters right becomes too much, and to remain quiet always, to ignore

one's misery, seems the best. Agnes had come to this point. Even her prayers made her heart sick. She had waited so long and nothing had come—perhaps to leave off, to try no more, to be still was after all the best.

This explains how it was that she said nothing to Lady Frogmore—not a word concerning the scene at the dinner, or the generous speech of Duke, or that improvised address of Mar. Some emotion must have come into Mary's mind, or she would not have fainted. But what was it? And how had the sight of her boy, and the hearing of him, and all that had been said about his father, affected her spirit? She gave no clue to this mystery. She was very quiet and feeble all the evening; would not go down again, and sent a message that she would see no one that night, but hoped to be quite well and strong for to-morrow. She sent her love to Duke, but mentioned no other name. Why her love to Duke? Was it because of what he had said? Was it for that generous setting forth of the other claims? Agnes shook her head sadly as she pondered in herself this mysterious question. But Mary threw no light upon it. She was more quiet even than usual, making little remark after that strange speech about her dream; and she said not a word of the incident of the day—the one point which everybody was discussing. Was she pondering it silently, feeling more than she said? Was her mind blank altogether to any light on that question? or was the light beginning to force itself upon her, to be painful and importunate?

These mysteries perplexed and troubled Agnes be-

yond measure; but she could not answer them. When she went downstairs into the house all full and overflowing with youthful life, the contrast with the calm to which she was accustomed, the extreme quiet—like a cloister—of the atmosphere which surrounded Mary was wonderful. They were all discussing what had happened, in every way, from every point of view. The dinner was over, the farmers driving away in their dog-carts and shandry-dans—a few gentlemen, neighbours, the vicar of the parish, Mr. Blotting, the man of business, and one or two others were waiting for the late and informal meal which was the end of the day. John Parke stood between his son and his nephew in the great drawing-room where they were all assembled, standing against the window and the clear evening sky. He had a hand on the shoulder of each, and his air was that of a man satisfied with the boys, making no difference between them, as if both were his own. Mar, the long boy, tallest of all the party, looked almost grotesque in his thinness and precocious height against the light. In the corner of the room, where her face was half visible in the twilight, not lost like the others against the background of light, Letitia was talking to the lawyer. She was talking quickly, her countenance agitated with feelings very unlike those which united her husband and the boys. "I disapprove of it altogether," she said, "it was a great mistake. Mar never ought to have been brought forward at his age, and in his state of health. I am very angry with Duke. He knows how particular I have been to keep the boy out of everything that is agitating and exciting, and now to

spring this upon us in a moment, upsetting everybody. Letty, you are always in the plot with those boys. I am sure you knew."

"I knew that Duke meant to say something about Mar, if that is what you mean, mamma."

"And you took good care not to tell me," said her mother. Letitia's eyes, though they were dull by nature, gave forth a sort of green light. "A boy of his age," she said, "to be brought forward in this way, and got up to make such a ridiculous speech and talk such childish nonsense. At all events Duke should have had more sense. Everybody knows how careful I have been about Mar, to keep him out of all excitement. He is not fit for it. If he had not been kept in cotton wool all his life I don't believe he would have been alive now."

"I think you are too anxious, my dear lady," said Mr. Blotting, "it will do the boy no harm. He is not a child. He'll have to take his part in life sooner or later. Perhaps you would find it wiser to let him accustom himself a little——"

"His part in life at sixteen!" said Letitia. "What is that? The schoolroom and his lessons——"

"I should have said a public school, if you and John had listened to me."

"He is not fit for a public school any more than he is for the affairs of life," cried Letitia. "Look at him! He's like a skeleton already. That boy never could hold his own at school. Oh yes, Duke got on very well, and so did Jack and Reggie. They are not at all delicate, but Mar—so long as I have charge of him he shall be taken every care of," Mrs. Parke said with decision.

"There must be no more of this. I shall not sleep a wink all night in the fear that something may happen to him—either brain, and that's most trying you know on one side of the house, Mr. Blotting—or heart."

"There's nothing wrong with Lady Frogmore now? I hear she has never gone back but maintained the improvement. I don't think it is like a family tendency that sort of thing. Many ladies, they tell me——"

"Oh, Mr. Blotting, they tell you gentlemen a number of foolish things where women are concerned. I have had six children, and did I ever go off my head on any occasion? No. Poor Mary must have had a tendency —and when I think of that, and what a dreadful thing it would be if anything should happen to the boy under my roof—"

"You are very much afraid of anything happening to my nephew Frogmore, Letitia."

"There it is," said Letitia. "I knew how it would be—Frogmore!—To give him a false idea of his position when he is not old enough to understand. Yes, Agnes Hill; I am very much afraid. I know what all of you would say if anything happened to the boy while he was with me. You would put your heads together, and you would whisper how much it was to my interest. Oh, I know very well all the attacks that would be made upon us. You would not say anything clear out, but you would insinuate the most horrible things. You know very well yourself that that is what you would do."

Miss Hill was not insensible to her own imperfections. She did not contradict Letitia. She even understood the anxiety which was not dictated by love or any concern for Mar, which was simply self-regard—a terror

for blame. It was not unnatural, and she did not believe that Mrs. Parke would do anything to harm the boy. She said no more. She did not offer to take the responsibility upon herself, and how could she criticize the woman who had it laid upon her, whether she would or no?

"The boy has clearly something in him," said Mr. Blotting; "he's not stupid. What he said was very well said, and so evidently genuine and unprepared. It's a pity he is not more forward in his education. I don't blame you, Mrs. Parke, nor your husband. I understand your feeling. Still, if you could have made up your mind to the risk—— The last man, Brownlow, don't you know, the tutor, thought——"

"The last man was an impertinent cad," said Letitia. "Oh, yes, I pick up the boys' words as everybody does. He was always unpleasant. His principle was to contradict me whatever was settled on. I wish you would not quote a man like that to me. We have done the best we could for the boy, John and I——. I wish his mother would take him; that would be the natural arrangement. I assure you we would jump at anything that would free us from the responsibility. Well, what is it now?"

"Mother; Mar is to sit up for supper. He couldn't be sent upstairs at this hour, a day like this?"

"Papa says he may," said Letty coming forward a step, dragging her father to the front with her arm through his arm.

"I don't say anything, Letitia," said John alarmed, "except with your approval. But I think you may relax

your care a little for once, for Duke's sake. I don't think it will do the boy any harm."

Letitia threw up her arms with a gesture of despair. "You must have it your own way of course," she said. "I can't oppose you; and if Mar is laid up to-morrow it will be his own fault, or it will be your fault, and much good that will do him. You can put him in the way of having a headache, but you can't bear it for him; but I wash my hands of it," Mrs. Parke said.

The supper was very gay. The few guests were all old friends. The youngest members of the family were all there, and the license of a family domestic festival prevailed. The one spectator who did not unbend was Agnes, whose heart was so full of anxieties that her countenance could not lose their trace. She sat by John's side, however, which was the most favourable place, and listened to all the chatter of the children, who had perfect confidence in their father, and felt in spite of herself a confidence in the eventual fate of Mar which she had never felt before. John Parke was but a stupid man, and he had not been without a feeling that to sweep the little interloper out of his way, if it could be done, was desirable; but that had long died away, and John had come to regard Mar as one of his family, with a little special pity for the delicacy upon which his wife dwelt so much, acquiescing in all her measures of special care for the weakly boy with a more generous and kind motive than hers. John was heartily pleased that Mar had distinguished himself, that it was he almost more than Duke who was the hero of the day. He was pleased with his son's generosity, and with his nephew's affection, and with the clamour and

pleasure of all the young ones ranged near him, leaving the strangers to be entertained by the mother. Tiny was at her father's elbow, the youngest of all, the privileged member of the party, at whose sallies everybody laughed, though perhaps they were not very witty. By one of those curious confusions of nature which occur in families, Tiny, who was like her mother—not a Parke at all, as good-natured friends said—had also, in certain aspects of her lively little countenance, a resemblance to Mar, who was a Parke all over except in the point of height. And it had been very agreeable to Mar to find in the baby of his aunt's nursery a something more feeble, more easily tired, less capable of fatigue than even he himself was considered to be; from which circumstance, and from the fact that the little one had become the playmate of the delicate boy when all the other boys had gone to school, there was a special tie between them. Mar himself was a totally different being here from the mild and sad boy whom Agnes had found alone in the schoolroom accepting his solitary fate with precocious philosophy. Very different dreams were now before his eyes. He had forgotten how likely it was that "something should happen." The gravest impressions disappear like a passing breath from the consciousness of sixteen. Mar had made a great step in advance by his first appearance in public. He felt himself almost a man, with fortune before him. He no longer looked on Reggie and Jack with the uneasy sense of superiority, yet inferiority, which is so bitter at all ages. The sense that he was more advanced than they, of a different kind of being in his boyish premature thoughtfulness, but oh so far behind the public school-

boy in everything that is most prized at that age, passed from his mind in the happier consciousness of personal importance, of being in himself something that Reggie and Jack could never be. This made the boy happier with them all, with the two boys who were least his friends and did not conceal their contempt of him, as well as with the others who patronized and pitied Mar. Neither of these conditions, which were both humiliating, were visible this evening. Duke did not patronize nor Reggie contradict. They were all, to say the truth, a good deal startled, even those who had brought that happy accident about, by the unexpected response of Mar to the call of circumstances. There is no English boy or man who does not feel the advantage of being able to make a speech. And though Mar might be a milksop, unfit for football, and unable to be out in all weathers, yet it was a tremendous revolution to find that he would stand up before a crowd and not be afraid to speak. Even Duke had learned off by heart a speech which had been prepared for him beforehand, the boys knew. But Mar said it straight off out of his head.

All this change of feeling Agnes perceived with an absorbed attention which in no way changed the grimness of her aspect as she sat at table. She listened to all the young clamour about her with a yielding heart but an unyielding face. "You are not used to a noisy party, and I am afraid they worry you," said John Parke, whose attention was suddenly called from his own placid enjoyment of his children's gaiety which he pretended to hush by times with a raised finger and a "Don't let your mother hear you making such a row"—to the

aspect of the "old lady," as he called her, though Agnes was younger than himself, by his side. "You see," he added, "it makes a difference, I suppose, when they are one's own—otherwise I object as much as you to the young ones taking the lead. It's one of those American fashions we are all getting infested with."

"It is an exceptional day," said Agnes, stiffly, as if she disapproved. She was not able to change the fashion of her countenance, notwithstanding the sympathy of her heart.

"That's it," said John. "Your eldest boy can't come of age but once in your life"—he laughed at this wise speech as he made it—"and then," he added, caressing his big moustache, "the boys acquitted themselves so well. That's what I look at. A boy mayn't be strong, but as long as he knows how to take his part in life——"

"Papa," said Tiny, "do you call a tenants' dinner life?"

"It's life in a kind of way," said Duke, whose attention had been attracted from more mirthful matters by that sound which would catch the ear through a bombardment or a cyclone, the sound of praise.

"They have all votes for the county," said Mar, whose ear had been drawn in the same magical way.

"That's a very good answer, Mar," said John. "Life's whatever you have to do with, in the condition you are in. And I can tell you that to make such a speech when you're suddenly called upon is one of the things—— I can tell you this. It makes my heart sink down in my boots. I'd rather meet a mad dog any day——"

"It's not so hard, Uncle John," said Mar, unable

altogether to suppress the instinctive desire of youth to instruct its elders, "when you have no time to think at all, but must just carry on."

John shook his head. "When you have to tell them you can't take off ten per cent. off their rent—it's not so easy," he said. "They don't sing 'He's a jolly good fellow,' then."

"It wasn't Mar that was the jolly good fellow, it was Duke," said Tiny.

"It was both of them," cried Jack from across the table.

"I started it myself," cried Reggie; "I know who I meant."

"It was Duke," said Miss Hill, to the great astonishment of the young ones. "It is not a thing I would ever sing—but I started it too. And Duke, if I ever was unkind to you—"

"You—unkind!" cried the young man with his laughing voice, in which the tears he was ashamed of were half audible. "But look here. I thought of what you said, Aunt Agnes. Now, father, listen, that boy's not to be Mar any longer. He's to be Frogmore."

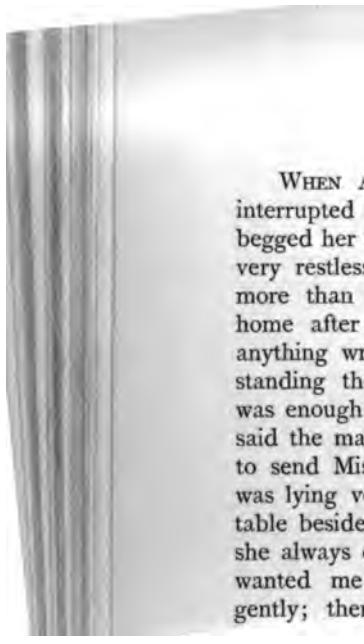
"Oh, Froggy—that is what I shall call him," said the little girl.

"What are you all saying?" cried Letty, who was making conversation for the vicar at the other end of the table, but who could bear it no longer. "What are you saying? You are keeping all the fun to yourselves, and I can't hear a word you say."

The boys began to sing, drowning her voice—the two schoolboys who had lost their heads altogether. Reggie "started" again, as he said, the chorus of the day; but

as Jack began a different performance altogether to the strain of "Froggy he would a wooing go," the two tunes clashed for a moment: until attracted by the superior appropriateness of the new ditty Reggie abandoned his first inspiration and chimed in, while Duke rising up cried, "We'll drink his health again, and christen him for the family, Frogmore!"

That moment, however, an electric shock ran down the table, the song died off into silence. Letitia rose from her place pale with wrath. "How can you permit such a Babel?" she cried. "I am ashamed of you, John. If it goes on another moment I shall have to leave the room: let me hear no more of this nonsense and childish folly here."



CHAPTE

WHEN Agnes went upstai
interrupted meal she was met
begged her to go at once to La
very restless," said the attend
more than a maid, the same
home after her recovery. "Y
anything wrong?" said Agnes,
standing the tranquillity of so
was enough to arouse her anxie
said the maid. This was enou
to send Miss Hill trembling to
was lying very quietly in bed,
table beside her, and a miniatur
she always carried about with h
wanted me, Mary?" "No,"
gently; then, after

a little sudden burst of tears. "Don't ask me. My head goes round and round——"

"No, indeed," said her sister; "no one shall ask you. I feared it might be too much; and then the tent was so hot this afternoon."

"The tent?" said Lady Frogmore, with a bewildered look. "I am not thinking of any tent. It is that the place is strange. I can't look him in the face, Agnes. Look! don't you think he is changed? He seems to reproach me." She held the miniature out to her sister. "And I don't know what for," she cried, weeping. "If I knew what it was for I could do better. But I can't tell, I can't tell!" After a minute she dried her eyes and looked at her sister again with a faint smile. "Don't look so frightened, Agnes, as if you thought I was—silly, or something. No, I know it's only a picture. I don't mean the miniature has changed; but when I see his face in my heart he always seems to reproach me. What have I done? Oh, if I only knew what I had done!"

"Dear Mary," said Agnes, "don't trouble your mind with imaginations. It is all fancy. Do you think Frogmore, who was so fond of you, would trouble your poor innocent soul with a reproach? Oh no, oh no."

"I think so, too," said Mary, "but sometimes there comes a terror over me as if I had neglected something or forgotten something. If he sees us, Agnes, he must know I never meant it! He must know I never meant it! People can't grow less understanding but more understanding when they die."

"Surely," said Agnes, "don't you remember, dear, in 'In Memoriam'—'With larger, other eyes than ours'?"

"It must be so," said Mary, holding her sister's hand. But I have such a dreadful feeling as if I had done something wrong."

"No, no, my dear; no, my poor dear."

"If I have it has been in ignorance, Agnes. I have never intended— Look," she said, suddenly turning to the table at the bedside, "do these old things belong to me?"

Poor Agnes took this change of subject for a sign of still further derangement of her sister's troubled thoughts. She gave a slight glance at the little common-place boxes. "Oh, my dear, don't think of such trifling things," she said.

"Agnes, look. Do they belong to me?"

"These boxes? yes. I think so—they used to hold your work. They used to——" Then Agnes paused, for she suddenly remembered where the larger of the two, an Indian box in sandal wood, inlaid with ivory and silver, had always stood, and the last use that had been made of it. "They are not of any consequence. They can't have anything to do with what we are speaking of," she said.

"You are sure they are mine?" said Mary, interrogating her face with anxious eyes.

"Oh, Mary, dear! yes, I am sure enough. They were put into a cupboard, I remember. There is a train about eleven, but perhaps to-morrow you may think differently. It will be a great disappointment for the boys."

Mary looked at her fixedly as if trying to understand. Then she said, "Tell Martin, Agnes, to pack them up. I want to look into them, perhaps there is

something in them that will show— But not here, not here!"

"It shall be just as you please," said Agnes, kissing Lady Frogmore's pale face. Martin whispered that she would not go to bed, that she did not like her lady's looks, that she would call Agnes at once in case of any need, thus securing for poor Agnes a wakeful and miserable night, as it is the habit of careful attendants to do. But it turned out that there was no occasion for this zeal. Mary slept, or at least was very quiet all the night. But she had not changed her mind in the morning. "Don't ask me to stay," she cried, "I can't, I can't stay." It was the morning of the ball, and the household at the Park was so much absorbed by that great event that so small a matter as the departure of a guest did not tell much. Agnes found Duke out of doors, closely attended, like his shadow, by Mar, just setting out upon some long expedition to cheat the hours until it should be time for lunch. "The day before a ball is always such a long day," he said with simplicity. "We are going off to pass the time." "And I am going off," said Agnes, "though not to pass the time. I am glad I have found you two to say good-bye."

"You are going away!" they both cried in consternation.

"I knew," cried Agnes, with a certain relief in expressing her feeling, "I knew it would be too much for her bringing her here. Oh, yes, it's true I was anxious to come. I wanted her to come, but I always felt it was a risk. Dear boys, I'm going to take you into my confidence. You're such friends! Thank God, you're

such friends! Well, then, I may tell you, I think she is beginning to awake."

"Aunt Mary?" said Duke, with a tone of awe. Mar said nothing, but his pale face crimsoned over, and he never took his eyes from his aunt's face.

"I think she's been in a kind of sleep all this time. Yesterday had a great effect upon her. She told me after, she had dreamed that there had been a great dinner and toasts, and one was to her old Frogmore. It has disturbed her mind, and she is going away."

"Oh," cried Duke, "that's not nice of Aunt Mary. My ball! I'll go and beg her to stay."

Mar said nothing, but kept his eyes on Agnes' face, watching her looks.

"You may go and say good-bye to her; but not Mar. And don't say anything of Mar, especially not as Frogmore. And Mar, my dear, you must keep away. She is so much excited already. You must not show yourself. She has found some old things she had before you were born, and I think her memory is beginning to awake. But, my dear, you must keep away."

"She does not seem to notice whether I keep away or whether I show myself," said Mar. "Was ever such a thing dreamed of as that one's mother—one's mother! should cast one off. In all the books I have ever read there has never been anything like this."

"Do you think it is her fault?" said Agnes, with sudden anger.

"How can I tell?" cried the boy. "It is no one's fault, perhaps; but that does not make it any easier to bear."

"I could tell you whose fault it was," cried Agnes.

"Oh nothing easier: but it is not your poor mother, the unfortunate victim, who is to blame."

Mar's eyes blazed in his pale face. "Who is it? Who is it?" he cried.

"Oh, what a wicked woman I am," cried Agnes, suddenly coming to herself, "that I should try to make you hate another person who perhaps had not as bad a meaning as I think. Oh, Mar, don't let us ask whose fault it was. Pray God only that it may be coming right—that my poor Mary—— You don't love your mother, Mar?"

The boy looked at her intently, keenly, with his bright, anxious eyes. He looked for a moment as if about to speak, and then turned hastily away.

"Ah, well," said Agnes, with a sigh, "perhaps it is too much to expect: but some time you will know better. She says that your father reproaches her; that his face in his picture is changed; that she has done something wrong and displeased him; but what it is she does not know. O, my poor Mary, my poor Mary! And there is only me to stand by her in the whole world."

Mar turned round again with his big eyes all veiled and clouded with tears. He tried to speak and could not. The boy was overwhelmed with feelings which were too strong for him, which he could not either master or understand.

"There is the carriage going to fetch her," said Agnes, "and I must go too. Good-bye, Mar. Oh, it's a dreadful disappointment to me to go so soon, not to have any more of you. I was your mother when you were little, Mar. You were my baby, and now I don't



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with a basin of soup in her hand and wrath in her countenance. "I did not think after all the fuss that has been made about you that you would choose this day to put us all out," she cried, "but I ought to have known that it was just the fuss and nonsense that would turn your silly head. Take this at once, and you can go to bed: for you certainly shan't come down again to-night."

"I don't want anything," said Mar, turning his head from the light.

"Take it this moment," cried Letitia; "I am not going to be trifled with. Nourishment you must have, and you shall have it so long as I am here to see after you. I have got a hundred things to do, but I shan't leave this room till you have taken it. You can do what you will with the others, but you shall not overcome me."

"Oh, take it, Mar, take it; and then we shall be by ourselves, and I will sit with you," said Tiny. Mar was too tired almost to lift his head, but he had a forlorn sense of youthful dignity, and would not give battle over the soup. And after he had swallowed it he dozed a little, and was conscious for a time of the comforting presence of Tiny, who, indeed, did a great deal for him in staying half-an-hour with him when there were so many conflicting occurrences going on downstairs—the decorations of the ball-room and the laying of the long tables, and the flowers and all the preparations for the evening, which were fast turning the sober everyday house into a fairy palace. She stole away as soon as she thought he had gone to sleep, not without a struggle with her conscience, which she put to silence by asking

it indignantly what good she could do to Mar when he was asleep? The boy dozed most of the evening, and when Duke and Letty rushed into the room to announce a second victory over their mother, and that he must get up directly for the ball, Mar only shook his head. He said they were to put his windows open so that he might hear the music and that he would go to bed. And it was thus that Mar spent the evening of the ball. He lay awake and heard the music, and wondered to himself how they were enjoying it, and if it was as beautiful as he had fancied it would be, and whether Letty was dancing all the time, and if they ever thought of him lying upstairs listening. They had all promised to come and see him from time to time, but nobody came except Tiny on her way to bed, very angry to be sent upstairs at twelve o'clock, and spoiling the effect of her toilette by her rage and her tears. "They are going to keep it up for hours," cried Tiny, "and how is a person to sleep with all that row going on?" It amused him faintly to see how angry Tiny was, and that she had entirely forgotten that he had already lain awake listening to it for hours that seemed to him endless. Then when fatigue began to conquer his wakefulness, and he was nearly asleep, there flashed in a brilliant couple, Letty and Duke, making a *tour de valse* in Mar's little room, and bringing him sweetmeats from the supper table. They did not come at the promised time, but as soon as they remembered, with the careless, frank affectionateness of brothers and sisters—"It is nearly dawn," said Mar, lifting his dazzled eyes. "Oh not for hours yet," they cried, valsing off again, almost before he could say "How beautiful you are,

Letty!" It vexed the boy that she did not hear him say it, and the sound of the carriages rattling up and down the avenue kept him awake for the rest of the night. But it was no longer night; it was bright morning when the visitors went away, and the house fell into uneasy silence at last—silence that did not last long; for, of course, the servants had to be up again to put everything straight, and prepare for the needs of the new day. Poor Mar, he too had looked forward a little to the ball, to see it, and decide whether it was as fine in reality as it was in books, and to see Letty dancing, and to hear all the pleasant things that would be said of Duke. It was not so bad for him as it would have been for a girl, who would have wanted to dance and not merely to look on; but still it was a forlorn way of spending the first night of splendour that since ever he was born had taken place in his own house.

CHAPTER XI.

LETITIA'S triumph and delight when she found that she was to have her ball to herself, without the presence either of Lady Frogmore, who would have made her seem second in what she called her own house, or Mar, who would have been the hero of the evening had he appeared, were great. It seemed to her too good to be true that Mary should come, giving thus her sanction and approval, and then go away, interfering with nothing; and that Mar should play into her hands, and disqualify himself by the fatigue of his long ramble, a thing which she could not have hoped for! It seemed to Mrs. Parke as if Providence had taken the matter in hand, and was fighting for her. It is easy to be pious when things go so much to one's mind, and it is always so easy to deceive one's-self about the virtuousness of one's aims. When a woman is scheming only for her children, and their benefit, does it not seem as if the stars in their courses should fight for her? And Letitia would have indignantly flung off the charge of selfishness: was it not all for Duke?—for her husband and her children? that they should have everything they wanted and a happy life; that they should, if possible, have all the honours of the race secured to them, or at least should triumph as much as possible over the un-

toward accident which had alienated these honours? It was not for herself, Letitia would have said, with fine indignation—what could it matter to her? and what could it be supposed but a mother's first and highest duty to strive for the advantage of Duke?

It must not be supposed, however, that Mrs. Parke's treatment of Mar had any distinct evil intention. It was her real conviction that the boy would not live, and she dealt with him as the man in the parable dealt with the talent which was given to him to make profit of, and which he laid up in a napkin. Had she been more generously inspired she would have endeavoured, even by taking a risk, to stimulate the forces of the delicate boy. Had he been her own son this is what she would have done; but Letitia's first thought was, not to save him, but that it might not be said he had been exposed to any danger while under her charge. She thought that she protected herself from all blame by making a hothouse plant of the boy, and shutting him up from every wind that blew. "No one can say he has not been taken every care of," she said. Should "anything happen," she, at least, would thus be free from blame. It would be known to all that she had been more careful of him than of her own—that she had not suffered the winds of heaven to visit his cheeks too roughly, that she had kept him from fatigue, from excitement, from everything calculated to hurt him. And in all this she was sincere enough. That she had also wished to ignore him, to keep him in the background, to give her own children the advantages which were meant chiefly for Mar, did not hurt her conscience. It was not for herself: she derived no benefit from the

fact that Mar was not sent to school: on the contrary it was a self-denial to her, a bond preventing her from amusing herself as she would, never leaving home except for a day or two. That it gave to Duke the principal place, and made John a much more important person in the county, were objects unconnected with Mrs. Parke's personality—then how could she be called selfish? It can never be selfishness to strive for the pre-eminence of your husband and your child.

Thus Letitia made her conscience quite comfortable when it did by chance give her a pinch. But generally it must be said her perfect conviction that she was right, whatever she did, subdued her conscience and kept everything quiet. Of course she was right! She had a delicate boy to bring up who everybody said would never be reared, and she took such care of him that he was never exposed to a draught, or suffered to escape from the cotton wool in which her assiduous and constant attention enveloped him. What could a woman do more? She thus put herself beyond the possibility of reproach whatever happened, while strengthening the conviction of everybody around that the young Lord Frogmore would never live to grow up; but if people chose to form that conclusion the fault was not Letitia's. When amiable neighbours said, "If care will save him I am sure, dear Mrs. Parke, you will do it," she shook her head again. "I do all I can," she said, "at the risk of being told I do more harm than good. Some people think I should try bracing for him —exposing him like the other children. But I think it is best to be on the safe side. I shall be blamed anyhow, whatever happens, I know," she would add with a

smile. She would have convinced anyone; and she did convince herself. She thought she was only angry with Mar because it was so difficult to make him take proper precautions. She was certain that she wished nothing but his good.

It may be supposed that the exhibition in the tent, the sudden surging up of Mar—the delicate boy whom nobody knew—into a distinct boyish personality, suddenly producing himself in the most attractive and characteristic way at Duke's dinner, when she intended only Duke to be thought of, was gall and bitterness to Letitia. She was almost beside herself with rage and exasperation. It had been all planned for Duke. It had been intended to give him the aspect of the heir (which he was sure to be eventually), and if there can be supposed any more sharp deception, any more poignant disappointment than Letitia's, when she saw the other boy, who was the shadow upon Duke's sunshine, the barrier to his advancement, pushed to the front, and so conducting himself there as to make it for ever impossible to speak of him as of a sick and puny child—it would be very difficult to find it. That she could have strangled Mar, and also Duke and Letty, and everyone who was in the complot, in the exasperation of her soul, is not too much to say. She had to conceal this under the appearance of anxiety lest the boy should have harmed himself, and discoursed, as has been seen, on the danger of excitement for him with a bitterness and energy which went too far, and betrayed something of her real motive at least to some of her children. But that real motive was not a guilty one.



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cost him dear. I did not take much satisfaction in his speech, for I knew it would cost him dear."

"I suppose he is here to-night," said the great lady of the county, putting up her eyeglass and looking round her, "I want to see him if you will let me, for his father and I were great friends. I want to ask him to Highwood now he is getting old enough——"

"Oh, he is not here," said Letitia. "He is in bed with a sort of nervous attack and great weakness. I tell my Duke his cousin was not able for excitement, but it is so difficult to make boys understand."

"It was not that, mamma—it was the long walk," whispered Letty at her ear.

"I see the Miss Winfords without partners," said Mrs. Parke severely, "and shoals of young men about. Go and introduce them—you little horror!" said the mother, the last words under her breath: and she turned again to the great county lady. "I knew," she said, "that he could not bear anything of the kind. Absolute quiet is the only thing that suits poor Mar. But my boy is very fond of him, and thinks it kindness to thrust him forward. All pure affection, but affection does just as much harm as enmity—or more sometimes." Letitia spoke with a strength of conviction which much impressed the ladies who were listening. "It is a great disappointment to us all," she said, "poor boy, that he can't be here to-night."

The same question was put to her again and again during the evening. "Where is little Frogmore? I want to see little Frogmore. I hear he quite distinguished himself at your tenants' dinner, Parke." "What have you done with the boy? I made sure



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Mrs. Parke, in the satisfaction of finding all possible rivalry absent, felt that her feet were upon her native heath as she had never done: she talked to everybody of Duke's prospects, and of the difference it made when he came home. She spoke of the younger boys who would have their own way to make, and must not think they would always have their father's house to fall back upon. She spoke of John's good intelligence with the "tenants," and how well he was getting on with the Home Farm, which he had taken into his own hands. For this night only she forgot to be careful; she took the full enjoyment of the position, as if everything was her own. Nearly a dozen years she had been in the house, with full command of everything. The children had grown up in it. How could she help feeling that it was her own? She forgot all about guardians and executors, and it seemed to her for a blessed hour or two as if all difficulties had been smoothed away, and Duke was indeed the heir, and she herself all but Lady Frogmore. Moments of intoxication will come like this in everybody's career—when we remember nothing that is against us, and are able to believe that all we wish is going to be fulfilled. It was remarked how Mrs. Parke's eyes, not bright by nature, glittered, and how her little person seemed to swell with satisfaction and pride as she moved about doing the honours.

But her aspect, I am afraid, was not regarded with sympathy by the greater part of her guests. We are all apt to believe that the outer world takes our view and regards matters from our standing point in such a moment of triumph. But as a matter of fact that is

precisely the time when it does not do so. Letitia's neighbours whispered to each other that Mrs. Parke looked as if everything belonged to her—"which it doesn't at all, you know," and talked as if her husband was the head of the house and her son the heir—"whereas, as soon as little Frogmore comes of age they must all pack off." They thought it bad taste of Letitia not to have produced the boy. "If he's as ill as that she might have had him on the sofa. He ought to have showed for a little," they said. But Mrs. Parke was quite unconscious of their sentiments. There never had been a time in her life when she had so ignored them. Always till now she had retained a consciousness of what people would be saying. But this evening it had vanished from her mind. She was *fey*, as people say in Scotland; her prosperity had gone to her head and made her forget everything that was not delightful. Either some great and critical moment or perhaps death itself was in her way.

"Well," she said, when all was over, "it has gone off as I never saw anything go off before. Everything went well, the music and the floor and the supper and the temper of the people. They were all so pleasant. The old marchioness made me the prettiest of speeches. She said, 'The Park has never been so brilliant as in your time.' The young people hoped we would have one every year. I said perhaps—for after all there is nothing so easily managed as a ball when it *is* a success."

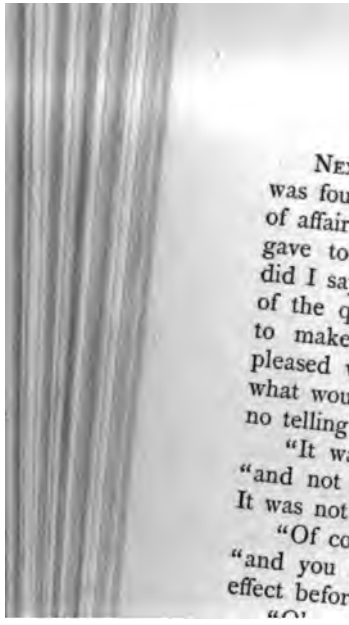
"You must remember, Letitia," said John, "that there cannot be very many years now before we've got to march out bag and baggage."

"Oh, don't speak nonsense," she cried incredulously. In the sweep of her excitement she would not receive that thought.

"But, mother, it's true," said Duke. "I've liked the ball awfully. You are one for this sort of thing, nobody can do it like you. But of course when Mar comes of age——"

"Oh, don't speak to me of Mar. He'll never come of age!" she cried in the wildness of her elated mood. There was a universal cry: "Letitia! Mother! Mamma!" in different tones of indignation and horror.

She was driven out of all sense of decorum in her heat and excitement. "Oh, you set of fools!" Letitia said.



CHAPT

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orders, and Mar got up. But when he was up he was giddy and "queer," so he said, and quite disposed to lie down again. The tide of life was so strong in the house with all these young people about that a delicate boy was not much remarked. Duke would rush up in the middle of his own occupation with his tennis bat still in his hand, or in his cricketing costume fresh from the village green, and say "Hallo, Mar! no better? You must get better, old fellow, and come and have a game." And Letty came in many times a day to ask how he was getting on. "You really must be better to-morrow, Mar," she said. "Mamma puts it all down to the tenants' dinner, and says you should not have been allowed to speak. She puts all the blame on Duke and me."

"There is no blame," said Mar; "it is only that I am such a poor creature. I am never good for anything."

"Well, you must be better to-morrow," Letty would say, and go off to her ride, or perhaps to her tennis which she too played very well. And then Tiny would come in with her hair flying, in her haste, as soon as her lessons were over. "Are you better, Mar?"

"Oh, yes, a little: but I shall not go downstairs to-day," the boy would say, smiling at her.

"Oh, it is too tiresome," cried Tiny; "I want you to come with me and get some water-lilies out of the pond. Duke's always so busy; he will never do anything. And I want you to come down the village with me to see the man about those little dachshund puppies. It is too bad of you, Mar, to be ill now. I want you so much."

"I am very sorry, Tiny, but you see I can't help myself."

"Oh, you could if you would try hard; just put on a resolution and make up your mind, and do, do be better to-morrow!" cried Tiny with vehemence. It is to be feared that this earnestness was simply on Tiny's own account, to whom Mar was a most serviceable follower—but the boy was grateful for this vigorous demand.

"I will if I can," he said—and then Tiny flew off with her hair waving, and he remained till the next visitor arrived. To tell the truth it was rather pleasant to them all to find him there always ready to hear what they had to say; and when they expressed their impatience with his illness, or ordered him imperiously to get well, they were though unconsciously only half sincere. "It's nice to have you to run to always, Mar," Tiny said, who, being the youngest, was the most unabashed in the utterance of fact. And Mar smiled and replied that it was nice to have them all coming to him. "If I am ever dull I know I shall soon hear someone running upstairs."

"But remember," cried Tiny, "you have promised to be better to-morrow."

"Oh yes," said Mar, "I shall be better to-morrow."

"If you don't, I heard mamma say she would send for the doctor, Mar."

"I shall be better," cried the boy. And as a matter of fact he did drag himself downstairs and got out to the avenue in a dutiful endeavour to follow Tiny to see after the dachshund puppies; but he grew so pale, and so soon found out that he could not drag one foot

after the other, that a great panic arose among the young people. Duke was called from his tennis (for there were visitors that afternoon and a great game was going on) by Tiny in a voice more like that of a signal man in a gale than of a young lady. "Duke!" she said, "Mar's fainted!" which brought Duke with a rush like a regiment of cavalry across the lawn, followed by Letty, her white dress flashing like a ray of light across the shadows. Mar fainted! They flung themselves upon him where he half sat, half lay upon a great trunk of a tree which had lain there for years overgrown with moss and lichens—the very same upon which Mary his mother had once thrown herself before he was born.

"No—I haven't fainted—I'm only—very tired. I'll go in again directly," said Mar.

"Oh can't you carry him home, Duke? We'll help you. Oh it is all my fault," cried Tiny, "if I had only known!"

"Old fellow," cried Duke, who had the tears in his eyes, "if you'll put your arms round my neck I'll carry you. I can, I can. Oh I wish you were twice the weight."

"Don't worry him," cried Letty. "He would rather walk with your arm and mine. Oh, I did not know you were so ill, Mar!"

Here Letitia came hurrying towards them, which brought a little colour back to Mar's cheeks.

"What's the matter?" she said. "You have stopped two games, rushing off like mad creatures. Oh, I might have known it was Mar."

"The two games may go to—Bath," cried Duke,

flinging away from him with disdain the racquet which he had still been holding in his hand.

"I'm quite able to walk now," said Mar. "I'll go home. Go back to your game, please. I'm not very well, Aunt Letitia. I couldn't get on any further, and Tiny took fright; that's all."

"You can give him your arm indoors, Duke, which he never ought to have quitted. I can't conceive what he means. He is always doing something to pose as if he was not taken care of. Letty, go back to your friends—go back when I tell you! I hope I know how to manage him. You can tell the doctor to come when he has finished his game. It is a good thing he is here. Now come along, Mar; a little energy. If you could walk so far as this coming out, you may surely get back again."

"Oh, easily," said Mar. And though it was not easy at all he accomplished it, and got back to the sofa in the schoolroom, where he had spent so many wistful days, putting the best face upon it that he could, and urging Duke to return to his game, which that light-hearted youth, quite reassured to see that his cousin could walk and could smile, did not hesitate to do, flying downstairs heaven knows how many steps at a time to get back to his play. The anxious group which had gathered around Mar like a whirlwind, dispersed again in the same way, relieved, and thinking no evil. Oh, yes, he was better—no worse than he often was; nothing to be frightened about.

"And now, let's finish our game," said Duke.

The robust yet careless family affection, which would have done anything for the weakling among them, left

him cheerful and comforted as soon as he was "better," having no anxious thought.

And Mar was left to Letitia and her terse and unemotional questionings. It was Mrs. Parke's habit to take all his ailments as a sort of reproach to herself.

"You might have known that it was not fit for you to go out in the blazing sun," she said; "but you seem to take a pleasure in behaving as if no attention was ever paid to you."

She went and got him a cushion with her own hands, and thrust it under his head with an irritable movement, and walked up and down the room, drawing down a blind over the window which gave Mar a glimpse of the sky and green trees he loved, and putting things in order which needed no arrangement.

"The doctor is a long time over his game," she said to the old nurse, who still attended to the wants of the schoolroom. "I think he might have come before now."

"Don't let me keep you up here, Aunt Letitia," said Mar. "There is not much the matter with me; it is a pity to trouble the doctor."

"You will please not meddle with what I do, Mar," she replied. "If you would only pay a little attention to what may be expected from yourself——"

The doctor came at last, and asked a great many questions and looked very grave. He ordered Mar to bed, not to lie on the sofa any longer, and gave a great many directions about quiet and fresh air and beef tea. He himself helped the boy to his room, and was so careful and so kind that there came to Mar's mind a half elation, half melancholy, in the thought that he was

going to be ill—that at last, after his years of delicate health, there was going to be something the matter with him which would prove all that Mrs. Parke had said, and of which he would possibly die. A great excitement, silent and suppressed, rose in his mind with this thought. It was alarming and strange, but it was not altogether unpleasing. There is a kind of pre-eminence, of superiority, in being very ill to a boy. It was like going into a battle. He felt solemnized, yet half amused. He was to be the hero of a sort of drama—he was to be in danger of his life. It pleased his imagination, which had so little food. And he tried to catch what the doctor was saying when he followed Mrs. Parke into the next room. But by that time he was getting drowsy, and his faculties dulled, and this he could not do.

In the next room the conference was grave enough. "He has never been ill before," said the doctor. "I have told you so from the first, Mrs. Parke: delicate but not ill, and nothing that he might not shake off with time. But he is ill now. If I am not mistaken he is in for an attack of typhoid, and I fear a bad one. I'll go straight to the hospital at Claremont and send you a nurse—indeed, you had better have two nurses —care is everything. With great care and unremitting attention we may pull him through."

Letitia was pale, but she was ready for the emergency. "It will not be dangerous for the others?" she said.

"No, no, there's no danger for the others—unless your drains are bad. But he says he was at that horrid little village on the other side of the Park on Friday

last, and got a drink of water there. That's enough to account for it. I've often spoken about the state of these cottages. It would be a kind of strange justice if he were to be the first victim. I suppose you'll let his mother know?"

"What is the use of letting his mother know? She takes no notice of him. I think I am the only mother he has ever known."

"There was an aunt," said the doctor, "who was very much devoted to him. They ought to be told. The fever is high, and he has a delicate constitution. He may have to fight for his life."

"Will you come again to-night?" she said.

"I will send the nurses in at once if I can get two, otherwise, perhaps, your old woman will take the night? I'll come back first thing in the morning. But I think you should let the relations know."

When the doctor was gone Letitia followed him out of the room and went to the schoolroom, which was quite cool and empty. She sat down upon the sofa which had supported Mar's languid limbs so long, and looked round her as if upon a new world. Her whole being was filled with excitement which threatened to burst all bounds. She felt as if she must have burst forth in laughing or in crying, and if she did not do so it was because the influence of conventional rules and common decorum are too strong to be broken. Every pulse was going like the wheels of a steam engine, and her heart thumping like the great piston that keeps all in motion. Was it anxiety and alarm for Mar that roused that tremendous tumult in her brain? It is to be supposed that she thought so, or tried to make herself think

so for the moment. But she knew very well that this was only a gloss forced by a horrified consciousness upon her, and that in the bottom of her heart it was a sudden and dreadful hope which had sprung up in her mind. The child had been so delicate all his life, one whom all the gossips declared she would never rear; and this had left a vague anticipation as of something she could not prevent, which would be good for them all if it came, modified by a fear of what might be said should it happen in her house, which kept Letitia always uneasy, and dictated those precautions which were half regard for other people's opinion, and half terror of herself. But Mar, though he had been so delicate, had kept, perhaps for that very reason, curiously free of the usual ailments of childhood. When he had them he had them in the lightest form. Never before had this delicate boy, this interloper who stood between Letitia and so many advantages, this child who, everybody prophesied, could not live—never before had he visibly hung between life and death. Typhoid fever! It was a name to chill the blood in the veins of loving parents, of anxious friends. It made Letitia's blood boil with a fever of impatience, of desire, of horrible eagerness, at which she was terrified, but which she could not subdue. It was not her fault. She had done nothing to bring it about. He had got the poison out of her house because of his own childish imprudence, exposing himself as she never would have allowed him to expose himself. Letitia's conscience was quite clear, and nobody could blame her. And he would die—a creature so fragile, with so little life in him, no constitution to fall back upon: there was no fear of a long and terrible illness:

a fever that sucked the strength away, and killed the strongest men, would not last long in such a case as this. He would die. She gasped with sensations unspeakable, and felt as if she could not get her breath. He would die. The obstacle would be taken away from her path, from John's, from Duke's and nobody could say that she had done it, or was in any way to blame. What a thought to invade and fill her whole consciousness, all the being of a woman who was a mother, and knew what it was in a way to love those who belonged to her! She could not keep down the wild buoyancy of her hope and exhilaration. This boy, who never ought to have existed, who had been from his birth the obstacle to all her hopes, this supplanter, this undesired, unnecessary child —he would die! and for Letitia and all who belonged to her the future of her brightest hopes would be secured at last.

But with this there sprang up in her mind a dreadful impatience. It did not seem to her that she could go on day after day enduring all the vicissitudes of this illness until the crisis came—if indeed his strength held out till the crisis came. Sometimes the patient, if he were weak, collapsed early, and the disease did not run its full course; sometimes it was rapid, violent, *foudroyant*. A hundred confused calculations ran through her mind. Mar had not life enough for that. Probably the fever would be slow with his low vitality, not blazing but sapping the life away: and she would have to keep up all through, expressing anxiety, watching day and night for the change, looking on with outward calm while the doctors would go through all that daily pantomime with the thermometer, which she would scarcely be able

to endure. Yes, this is how it would be—weeks of it, perhaps, horrible, lingering on when it might just as well be over at once without all this slow torture. Letitia remembered after what seemed a long time that she had an afternoon party on the lawn, and that all her guests would be wondering at her absence. She would have to put on a grave face, and speak of her anxiety and his delicacy, and go through all the fantastic performances which decorum demanded. But he would die—of that certainty at least there could be no doubt now.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE family were all very much startled by the news, which Letitia communicated only when the arrival of a nurse in the costume which is not to be mistaken startled the household. "What does that woman want?" said John, who was prejudiced like so many gentlemen against costume, and did not like the professional air. "She is the nurse whom Dr. Barker has sent for Mar." "For Mar," cried all the party with varying tones of expression. Letitia looked round upon her husband and her children, and she felt that there was not one of them who had any sympathy with her—who thought at all of the consequences or of what would happen— if—— She was provoked beyond expression by the look of alarm and imbecile anxiety on all their faces. "What is the matter?" John said. "Is there anything more than usual? I thought he had a cold. What is wrong with the boy?"

"Only an attack of typhoid," Mrs. Parke said with angry gravity. They never did sympathize with her or enter into any of her thoughts—though the advantage she anticipated was to them chiefly, she said to herself angrily, and not to her.

And that dreadful word was soon abroad in all the house. It was the evening, after dinner, and all who

were at home were in the drawing-room. The two schoolboys, Reggie and Jack, had, of course, gone back to school. And the girls had been talking of their lawn tennis, and So and So's low service, and somebody's volleying, and a great deal of other jargon. They had been obliged to dress in a great hurry for dinner, and no one had had the time to run in and ask for Mar. "Typhoid!" they cried, some of them in loud, and some of them in low tones.

"Who says so? you are always fancying something dreadful. Does Barker say so? And how did he get it?" said John. "I am sure we have had trouble enough with the drains."

"If one is to have it, one will have it, whatever is done about the drains," said Mrs. Parke.

"But oh, mamma," said Letty, "why a nurse? I know a great deal about nursing. There were those two ambulance classes. It would be so much nicer for dear Mar to have his own people about him. Sarah would sit up at night, she is very fond of him, and I would take care of him in the day."

Letitia did not take the trouble to reply, but looked at the girl only, crushing her as effectually as by a torrent of words. "He shall have every care," she said, "and the best that can be got: but he has no constitution, and I fear it will go badly with him. There is no use in deceiving ourselves."

"Don't be a croaker," cried John, getting up from his chair. It would have been strange, perhaps, if there had not flashed across the mind of John all that was implied in this evil augury. He was not quick, nor was he more selfish than other men, but into the hearts of

the most innocent there is projected by times a picture as from a magic-lantern, showing as it seems from without, not from within, in a sudden glare of diabolical light the advantage which a great misfortune to someone else may bring them. John was as much horrified by this sudden perception as if he had been compassing the end of Mar. He cried out, "Good God!" which was in reality an appeal against the devilish light that had flashed upon him without any will of his; and then his voice melted, and he murmured, "Poor little Mar. Poor little Mar!"

"Don't give in in that way, father," cried Duke. "Typhoid fever is bad enough, but not so bad as mother makes out. Why, I know half a dozen men who have had it. At Harrow there was one fellow as bad as bad could be, and not strong, just like Mar, and he got round all right. The stronger the fellow the worse it is for him. That's what all the doctors say."

These words brought a cold chill to Letitia. In her thoughts, by way of forestalling all the disappointments that might happen, she had already thought of this.

"Oh, mamma, send for some new books from Mudie's directly," said Tiny; "when Mar is ill we can never get enough books to satisfy him."

"Oh hold your tongue, Tiny. He will be too ill to read books," said Letty with tears, "and one must not let him talk either, but just a very little—nor even talk to him to amuse him till the fever goes off."

"How dull it will be for Mar!" cried Tiny. "I am sure I shall talk to him and tell him everything. To be dull is as bad as having a fever. Because you have gone to the ambulances you think you know—but I



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understand that neither
must be left in the hand
to play with. I shall go
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There was a chorus
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that. What Duke says is
that a weakly boy with
upon, attacked by a slow
strength——"

doom. "God forgive me! God forgive me!" cried John: and he went out covered with a cold dew of trouble to humble himself and struggle with the demon. These horrible suggestions come sometimes to the minds that most loathe them: which proves to many people that there is a devil, a dreadful Satan, trying what harm he can do, even though we may grow contemptuous of the horns and hoofs.

The doctor, however, was not so gloomy as Letitia. "It is quite true that he must not be disturbed; but keeping up his spirits is half the battle, and he must not be abandoned either. Mrs. Parke is too anxious. I have always told her she made more than was necessary of young Frogmore's complaints. He's delicate, of course. Still there's no reason for giving up hope."

"My boy, Duke," said John, "says that it's worse for strong fellows than for weak. I don't know if he's right."

"Well, it's never a good thing to be weak," said Dr. Barker, "but there's a kind of truth in it. For the fever sometimes runs higher with a man in the prime of life. Keep up your spirits. If no complications arise we'll pull him through."

Those cheerful tones found no response in the countenance of Letitia, which was tragical in the paleness of passionate feeling. Every word that was uttered by the medical optimist was like a knell in Letitia's heart. If it should be so indeed—but it could not, it should not be so.

"Mrs. Parke has always taken too serious a view," said the cheerful doctor. "I have told her so for years."

"I don't say that I don't always take a serious

view," said Letitia. "It is my temperament I suppose: but you will bear me witness, doctor, that I never have been so anxious about my own children as I have been about Mar."

"Yes, that is true," said the doctor, with a quick glance at her, in which there was something uncertain, doubtful. Perhaps it was the look of suppressed excitement in her which struck Dr. Barker as something strange. She was not an over-anxious mother. Was it love or another sentiment that made her so tragic about Mar? A slight shiver ran over the honest and sensible country practitioner, but he was far too little accustomed to evil passions to follow it further. He could not take into his mind such a dreadful thought; it was like a ghostly figure sweeping by in the dark, such as he sometimes met on lonely roads on winter nights—not able to tell whether it was a belated fugitive or a distorted shadow. Another subject of more practical importance, as he thought, displaced this vague apprehension. "By the by," he said, "I must not forget one thing. I have been talking to you of the state of those cottages on the other side of the park for years. I've got the water to analyze which these poor people are drinking, and I believe it's the cause of poor young Frogmore's illness. Let this be a reason at once for seeing after their condition: at least it will be getting some good out of the evil which now you cannot prevent. You know I've been talking about it for years."

"The cottages?" said John. He added, "You know I'm in a peculiar position, I can do nothing without Blotting. It's not as if it was my own property."

"Oh what is the use of talking of such things just

now," said Letitia, sharply. There was a sort of half electrical glance between the two which the doctor felt to blaze across him, scorching his face. He gave a horrified look from one to the other, surprising that infernal light in Letitia's eyes. But John's were covered with downcast eyelids, and the look of his somewhat heavy face did not coincide with that unearthly, devilish flash. Dr. Barker, however, was struck as a man might be struck by lightning. He seemed to lose his moral equilibrium for the moment. A chill horror ran in his veins. When he thought of the boy-patient upstairs with his cheeks growing hollow and his eyes large under the influence of the fever, and these two, watching its progress, perhaps communicating to each other how things were going, hoping for the worst and not the better conclusion, it was as if the earth had been cut away from under his feet, and he saw himself suddenly on the edge of a horrible precipice. He rode away upon his rounds with a doubt whether it was safe to leave the house, whether he ought not to set up some special guard that no evil should approach the boy. Poor boy, with no one who loved him to look after him, but only dangerous hate and the vigilance of an enemy! The honest country doctor had never in his life been struck as he was that day with a sense of secret horror, danger, and possible crime concealed under the smooth surface of ordinary existence. Twice he turned back before he had got out of the avenue with the idea of warning his nurses, recommending to them special vigilance, and not to allow Mrs. Parke to have anything to do with the patient. But how dared he do such a thing, to rouse any suspicion of the



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solemnly morning and evening to the door to ask of the nurses how their patient was. Sometimes he stood at the open door looking in, saying as well as he could a cheerful good-morning to the boy. "Make haste and get well, my lad," he would say; and John, though he was not given to anything of the kind, would sometimes bring a rose and sometimes a piece of flowering myrtle from the great tree at the door of the conservatory to lay on the little table at Mar's bedside. Mar, when he was able to remark them, was much touched by these little attentions, and John would go away again soothed by the sight of the active nurses in their white aprons, and the quiet and order of the sick-room. It was a comfort to think that everything was being done. This is a great consolation to every kind looker-on whose anxiety is less urgent than that of love. John never saw Letitia there; he knew that the nurse who was on duty, if moved by no profound sentiment for one patient more than another was yet on the whole desirous that every one should get well, and had her professional reputation more or less involved in the success of her nursing. There was thus at least no hostile sentiment, but only well-wishers, careful watchers, concerned for his recovery, who were near the boy.

But neither he nor any one any more than the doctor had any fear of Letitia as if she had been capable of plotting against the young life. No, no, no, a hundred times no. They divined the passion that was in her, the sense of a possibility which would change everything in life, and perhaps, perhaps a wish against which in her heart no doubt she struggled, and would not allow that the balance should turn the wrong way.



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CHAPTER XIV.

MAR'S illness continued week after week, never violent, but never ending. He was not very ill, but his life was being slowly drained away. The fire of the fever was low, not a great flame, blazing and devouring, but it went on and on. The third week passed, and the fourth, with renewed and disappointed expectations of a change, but none came. "It will run out the six weeks," said the doctor. "And then—?" Ah, who could say. The good doctor, who had taken care of Mar all his life, turned away from the question. "It all depends upon his strength," he said. His strength! but he had no strength. He was as weak as a child. The nurse lifted him in her arms like an infant—a skeleton, with long, long limbs. It seemed a farce to speak of his strength, as if there was any hope in that.

Duke had gone away before this time—his leave had come to an end, and he had been allowed to come in and say good-bye to his cousin. "I thought you would have been up and about before I went," said Duke, blustering a little to keep himself from crying. "You are a lazy beggar, to be lying there with nothing the matter. I don't think there's anything the matter with you. You just like to lie there and keep us all slaving attendance. You know you were always a lazy beggar."

Mar did nothing but smile, as he had always done at Duke's jokes which were not great jokes. He said, "Is your leave over?" with his faint voice. "But you could have a day or two again if I sent for you, Duke?"

"Oh, yes," said Duke, "you must send for me the first time you are allowed to get out, to help you downstairs. I'll come, never fear." But after a little more of this tearful smiling talk, the young man beckoned softly to the nursing sister to come with him to the door. "What do you think he means about sending for me?" he said, with a face almost as pale as Mar's.

The nurse looked at him and shook her head. She too had grown to like the patient boy. She put up her hand to her eyes to dash away the rising tears. "He must not see that I have been crying," she said.

"Is *that* what he means? Do you think that's what he means? And do you think so too?" cried Duke. "Oh, don't say so, nurse, don't say so; it would break my heart."

"I won't say so," she replied. "I think with such a young thing as that there is always hope."

"And you know a lot," said Duke, "as much as the doctor. God bless you for saying so! But you think that is what he means? And he lies there—and smiles —and thinks—of *that*," said the young man, with his face full of awe. He set out in all the vigour of his young life in the brightness of the summer day to his light work and boundless amusement, with all the world before him—and Mar lying there, smiling, thinking of *that*. Duke felt as if his own lightly beating heart stood still in the poignancy of the contrast. Oh, why could

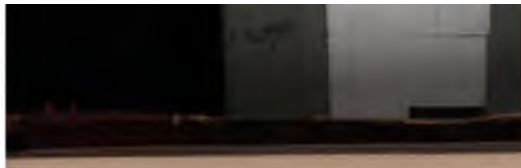
not he give some of his life to help out that flickering existence? He went away feeling that there was a pall over the sunshine, and that nothing would ever be truly bright again. But to be sure that was a mood that could not last.

Mrs. Parke had given orders at first that the girls were not to go near the sick-room, but she had not thought then how long it would go on, an endless dreadful ordeal. And when they stole in, now Letty, now Tiny, their mother either did not find it out or made no remark. Letitia during all this time of suspense was of a very strange aspect—her husband and her children did not know what to make of her. She talked very little to them; did not interfere with their pursuits as she usually did. She seemed to care for nothing. Naturally there were no guests or entertainments of any kind, and her interest in her household affairs, which was usually so minute and unending, seemed to have faded altogether. She wrote no letters, made no calls, her social life seemed to come to an end. She did not even go to church, which was a habit she had always kept up rigorously. Three or four times a day she went to the sick-room for news of the patient, and it was there alone that she seemed to wake up completely. She put the nurses through a catechism of questions. She attended upon the doctor when he came, and listened to everything he said and that was said to him with a hungry curiosity. Her countenance did not vary or betray it. It was known that she was "over-anxious," that she had always taken a despairing view. When he was pronounced to be a little better there was a little quiver of her head, like an unspoken contradiction; and



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the critical day of each week when a crisis might be expected she was so restless that she could not keep still. "My wife is so anxious," John said, trying to persuade himself that her anxiety was the natural anxiety, the desire that the patient should get well. That anxiety is terrible enough as most know; but the other anxiety, the horrible watch which is for the patient getting worse, the longing for "a change" in the worst sense—a change that meant death, how horrible is that, beyond all description! When she talked at all she talked of his symptoms and of what the night nurse said, and what the other said. The nurses took different sides as was natural. One of them was pessimist, the other took the doctor's view. It was the night nurse that was the gloomy one—and with her Mrs. Parke was in the habit of having a long consultation very early when she was relieved in the morning—a consultation from which she derived a little satisfaction, and which calmed her nervous excitement. But the day nurse with the cheerful look, who always insisted that the patient was a little better, or looked a little brighter, or had a little more strength, or at all events was "no worse" brought back the nervous excitement which was like a fire in her veins.

The fifth week had begun, and the fight of life and death on the boy's wasted frame was becoming every hour more intense. Would his strength hold out? "He has no strength," said the night nurse. "I feel every hour as if from minute to minute the collapse must come." "I don't say he isn't very weak," said the more cheerful sister, "but you never can tell with a delicate boy like that how strong the constitution may be.



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"His mother—what
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nothing to her"

"But that is not enough," said the doctor, glad on his side to have some reason to find fault, to relieve his own brain and heart with an outburst. "She must be told that his state is very serious. She must be made to know——"

"Then you think his state is very serious?" said Letitia, with a kind of wildness of concealed exultation in her eyes.

"Have I ever said otherwise?" said the doctor. "Can anyone look at him and not see that?—very grave but not hopeless, Mrs. Parke. You will never get me to say more."

"It is only because I want to know the truth," she said, abashed.

"I will never tell you anything but the truth. The mother ought to know. However indifferent she may be there must be some human feeling left. I remember her as a very sweet woman. And then there was the aunt who was devoted to the boy."

"You speak as if there was but one," said Letitia, with a forced smile.

"Oh, I do not overlook your anxiety, Mrs. Parke! No doubt it is very great—but the other ladies must be told. Tell them——" The doctor paused when he saw her hungry look. It flashed into her face that now she should hear the exact truth how much there was to fear and how much to hope. She looked at him as he paused, clasping her hands tight.

"Yes?" she said, breathless. The doctor, it was evident, had thought better of what he was going to say.

"Tell them," he said, "that the circumstances are serious: that there is an absence of certain of the worse



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"Then you think——" s
her breast.

"I think no more than
have Lady Frogmore here a
case be best."

Letitia repeated "Lady
under her

in her now as if the end of her suspense was near. John came in when she had seated herself and begun her letter. He had missed the doctor and was anxious to hear what he had said. There was something in his wife's aspect which startled him. "The boy is better?" he exclaimed. He gave her in the impulse of the moment a credit which she did not deserve.

"Is he?" cried Letitia, turning round upon her chair with all the colour going out of her face. She added tremblingly, shrinking from her husband's eye, "Do you mean that there is a change?"

"I thought so," he said gravely, "from the relieved look in your face."

They contemplated each other for a moment in silence, John with pain and distress, she shrinking a little from his eye. "I don't know what you mean," she said; "though I might be relieved to think that the poor child will not suffer much longer. I am to write to his mother, the doctor says."

"To write to his mother! Then he has given up all hope?"

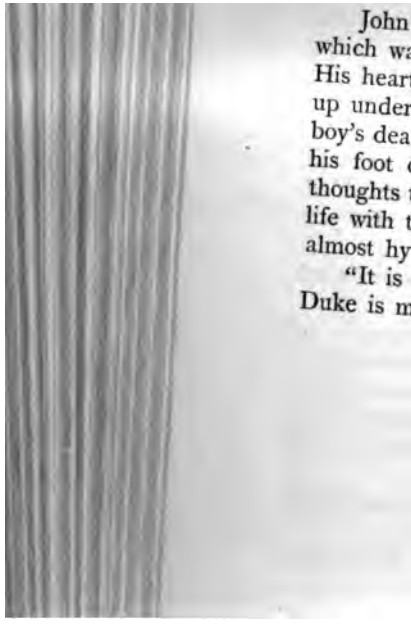
Letitia did not trust herself to speak, but she nodded her head in assent.

"Poor boy, poor boy!" cried John; "and poor Mary," he added after a moment, with a broken voice.

"It will be nothing to her," said Mrs. Parke briefly.

"God knows! it may rouse her to understand what she's losing: the finest, promising boy, the most generous and patient——"

"Oh, John, I cannot put up with you!" cried Letitia, wild with agitation and excitement. "The one creature that stood between your son and his birthright—be-



John Parke walked at
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"It is easy saying so,"
Duke is more to me than M

CHAPTER XV.

"THEN, I suppose, there is scarcely any hope," said Mr. Blotting, the other executor who had come over to inquire after the patient. The country altogether was moved for poor Mar. People who had never seen the boy sent daily to inquire after him, and the farmers, who had cheered his speech, talked of him and shook their heads as they met on their market days. "There was no stuff in him," they said; "all spirit, and nothing to ballast it." "No constitution from his cradle." And they began to speculate on what kind of landlord John Parke would be when he acted for himself with full power. They all gave a regret to the boy; but that was the most important question after all.

John Parke had not, however, waited, as his wife suggested, to take measures to amend the cottages, where Mar had got what was probably to be his death, and it was while they were walking across the park to inspect the miserable little hamlet which was close to one of the gates that Mr. Blotting had supposed that there was scarcely any hope.

"My wife has been told to write for his mother," said John, very seriously. "Barker would not take such a step as that, in the circumstances, if he did not think it was coming very near."



so little about him—the

"I wonder," said Jo.
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"It's to be hoped not
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boy was born. I felt it
Mrs. Parke deeply. It co
a man like your brother,
thought of marrying. It w
suppose that the poor boy
but it seemed a cruel busi

"It did, it did," said

authority in the matter, and you are acting altogether for yourself——"

"Don't speak of it, Blotting. I can't enter on such a question. So long as there is life there is hope."

But John Parke would have been more than man if he had not allowed a thought or two to surprise him in this kind. He hated himself, but he could not help it: that all this would be his, absolutely his, which he had been managing for another; that he should be able to act independently, to think of the children's interests without any responsibility or restraint was a wonderful thought. Poor little Mar! If he could redeem his young life by any sacrifice! But he could not do that. Not all the lands attached to the Frogmore peerage, or all belonging to the British crown, could have any effect upon the disposition of the Supreme Disposer of events. John acquiesced in this certainty with a sigh; and then he thought—how could he help thinking?—of what, when he was a free agent, he would do.

The cottages were a very picturesque group of red roofs and antiquated brickwork, situated picturesquely among a clump of trees. It was a thousand pities to pull them down or do anything to them. They were always the first sketch made by every amateur artist who visited the neighbourhood, and they figured two or three times in the Academy every year under the titles of "A picturesque nook," "The homes of our forefathers," "A hamlet in Blankshire," etc. A rumour had been spread about in the neighbourhood that the cottages of Westgate were to be destroyed, and naturally the cottagers were up in arms. As Mr. Parke and Mr. Blotting were seen approaching, first one head and then



woman, bent half-double
head continually moving
came out from one of t
gentlemen. "You ain't
cottages; now don't ye sa
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houses, as though her fe
done anything. "Oh, dea
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"If we do anything to
new ones, and far better
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told for nothing, and who
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"We don't want no c
woman. "We 'as what su
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he was all in a sweat

long thin legs, and his white face, and you'd see there was nought that was solid in him. Don't you go and judge what's good for us by 'im. Why, that one would ne'er have had no strength, not if he'd been born and bred at Westgate. It wasn't in 'im, and if it hadn't been one thing it would have been another. He was born to die, was that young lord. There was his mother afore him that was druv crazed by that tother lady as made a fuss about the baby coming. Lord, just think what a woman to have a baby, as couldn't give her answer back, but went mad when she was talked to! I was at the Park at the time. I was in the laundry, and there wasn't one of us servants that didn't know."

"What does she mean?" said John.

"Nothing, I should say," cried Mr. Blotting. "Come, old lady, you've given no reason why we shouldn't pull down your old rookeries that are full of damp and dirt and the rot and mildew. Why, it would be far more comfortable for yourselves. You would be ten times better."

"Dirt yourself, mister," cried the old woman in high indignation, "unless it's Sally Brown's, the woman at the corner, as isn't true Westgate, there ain't no dirt more than's natural. And as for the young lord, you was always told as you'd never rare him. And no more you haven't, and as for it's being our well, as we drinks every day, it's none of our well. And you just let us alone, mister!" She turned instinctively to Mr. Blotting, as to the inferior person of the two, although, old and nearly blind, she did not recognize John.

"What's that story about the lady," he said.

The old woman glared at him with her bleared



"It's not so easy as y
said Mr. Blotting. "I coulc
better build your new cotta
them before you pull down

"And let them die of ty
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Letitia wrote her letter,
though she had a much stron

Mary or not. Probably she will not mind much—which will save her a great deal of grief, poor soul, in case things should turn out badly. He seems to have caught this fever the day you went away in such a hurry. He deserted us all and strolled off by himself into the park, and wore himself out. You will know best whether you said anything to the boy to upset him. He stopped tired at the houses at the Westgate, and asked for some water which was given him from their well. Dr. Barker says this is quite enough to account for it. It is a relief to me amidst all our trouble that he did not get it from anything in my house." And she ended by repeating her promise to write again if there was "any change." Letitia felt that she could now say "my house" without hesitation. It was as good as her house now—her great restlessness was calmed down. She went on and wrote a number of letters telling the sad circumstances to her habitual correspondents, whom she informed that her poor young nephew Lord Frogmore was lying dying, with a great deal of emotion. She wrote very affectionately of Mar. It was easy now to say that he was a dear boy, though always very delicate, never able to do the things that the other boys did. "But he has twined himself very much round all our hearts," wrote Letitia, "and I don't know how to console the children who adore him." She could say this without anger or any vivid feeling in the certainty that Mar was going to die. For the first time since she had known him she completely approved of Mar. It was a sad thing, no doubt, but it was for the best. He never could have been able to enjoy life—the best that could have been looked for for him would have been an in-

valid existence, never to be depended upon: and he was such a good boy, so well prepared, looking forward to his release with such resignation and piety. Letitia almost made herself cry, she gave such a touching account of Mar.

When she completed those letters she felt more calm than she had done for many a day. The feeling of suspense was gone. The doctor she felt assured would never have said so much if there had been any hope left. And now she could permit herself to entertain those thoughts which had visited her at intervals for years, and which she had not permitted to dwell in her mind, thoughts captivating and attractive, of all the changes she would make and all the things she would do when she came into her kingdom. There were certain improvements to be made in this very house which she had always wanted, which she decided upon the very first time she ever came to the Park, while old Frogmore was still master of all. She had said to John on that occasion (though she was not much more than a bride at the time), "I shall change all the east wing, and turn the library into a second drawing-room when we are here." John had bidden her told her tongue, and asked how she knew they would ever be there? Frogmore, who was so strong, would probably outlive him, John said. But Mrs. John was sure that she knew better. And now how much had happened! It had seemed all to float from them and become impossible, and then again it had returned again to possibility, and now it was nearly come to pass. Very nearly! It was only a question of time now. Ten days or so and everything would be settled—at the

furthest; if it was possible that he could hold out so long. She indulged herself by thinking it all out how she could make those alterations. Many a time had the vision drifted across her eyes, but she never allowed herself to caress and indulge that vision. She thought not only of the alterations, but of a thousand things beside. The position would be so different. No critical observers to remark on what she did; it would be her own to do what she pleased. No narrowness of money to prevent this and that, to drive her into half measures and improvements incomplete. What she did she could do with confidence, knowing that when John's time was over (Letitia did not think that her own time might be over), her son would come after him. Everything would become legitimate and natural from the moment that this poor boy was mercifully removed to a better world. It would be better, far better for him: for he never could have had but a wretched invalid life in this world. And for everybody else how much better. The children would all have their rights—the privileges which Mary Hill had taken from them when she married old Frogmore. To have an Honourable to their name would be an advantage even for the girls. And their way of life would be so changed. Letitia went about the house lightly with a changed countenance. Her suspense seemed over. It was not that the doctor had said anything more than he had said over and over again; but she took it in a different way. Her mind was at rest. She spoke quietly to the people whom she saw, of the great sorrow that was hanging over the house. There was no doubt, and no pretence at any hope in her tones. Her confidence was extraordinary, as had been

the rage of her suspense a little time before. She allowed herself to talk to John of the things that would have to be done, and he did not stop her. He said nothing himself, but he did not refuse to listen to her. Her certainty as to their changed positions impressed her husband with a sensation of certainty too. She had always been in the right, and there seemed no reason for doubting her now. This conviction was accompanied in John's mind with a real sorrow for the dying boy. Poor Mar! To purchase advantage by the sacrifice of that innocent life was bitter to John, he said to himself; and if by any effort of his he could save the poor child's life—but what could his efforts do when the doctors had given him up? And no doubt Letitia was right, and it became them to realize their position. He allowed himself to think of the alterations too.

And meantime Mar lay in a strange confusion, his faculties all dulled with his fever, the burning hours going over him, so that he knew not night from day: with kind hands ministering to him, but only the hands of strangers—and the minds of all about him gradually turning to a consideration of the life and the world beyond, in which he should have no part. There he lay, always patient, smiling still when he was roused from his stupor, drifting on to the end.

CHAPTER XVI.

Lady Frogmore had hurried home when she left the Park the day after Duke's birthday full of agitation and confused trouble, not knowing what ailed her, dissatisfied with herself and everything around, yet like a blind creature groping for what she knew not, a clue to guide her through the darkness. She fretted through all that day, impatient of the lingering of the trains and the long time of waiting at one junction and another. "If I can but get home! I think I will never leave it again—one is safest at home," she said. When she reached that quiet house at last, embowered in its trees and little park, to the great surprise and even displeasure of the servants, who had hoped for a holiday, she repeated the same sentiment, throwing herself down with a sigh of satisfaction on a sofa in her pleasant drawing-room. "One is safest at home!"

"Dear Mary," said Agnes, whose nerves were fretted and her temper overcast, so that she could not take this unreasonable satisfaction with the calm she usually showed. "You are safe enough anywhere. Who would interfere with you? England is not like a wild country where people are in danger when they move." Agnes had not been able to show her usual tolerance during this day. It had been very harassing and disagreeable



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her sister

done it if I could. For you, dear, if not for anything else. And to please poor Letitia——"

"Oh Mary, Letitia!"

"You are very hard upon her," said Mary. "She is like me, she has been disappointed. She has not had what she might have expected. Oh, don't ask me how, for it turns me all wrong. I have never understood it, and I never shall understand it. Keep me away from them, Agnes. Keep me away from them. Don't make me think and think. My head turns round, but I never get any clearer. Oh, don't ask me to go there again."

She put her hands together like a child, and turned her mild eyes to her sister's with more than a child's passion of entreaty in them. How hard it is to fathom the mysteries of a mind thus veiled by heavy misadventure and injury, cut off in fact from the record of its own life! Mary had been roused to think, she had been startled out of her calm, but all fruitlessly, only enough to make her brain swim, and fill her being with confusion and mental pain. She clung to the quiet which was in her secluded home. She felt when she entered it again as if she had escaped from all that could shake and startle her. The strange commotion that had arisen within her when Mar rose in the rustic assembly, when he spoke with a voice which was familiar, yet unfamiliar, full of echoes of dead voices, and which struck to her very heart, she knew not how, had been like a terrible storm to Mary. She could not find her way among the vague thinkings that were all stirred up within her—broken recollections, suggestions, an indistinct new world which was at the same time old. A little more and she might have caught the clue, found



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it entirely unimportant whether Mary ever recovered her complete understanding or not, as she did that a vague light had already been established in Mary's confused mind, which would not be quenched again. She gave up consciously all attempts to lead that sealed mind to clearer understanding, and doing so with a pang of resignation, seemed to bury for herself all the brighter hopes that had still survived within her—hopes which had supported her through many a troubled and monotonous year.

The Dower House was at the other side of the county, as has been said, and further off from the Park than if it had been twice as far in a more direct way. It stood on the corner of a little property, one of the portions of the estate which had been longest in the hands of the family, six or seven miles from the nearest railway station, with nothing more important than a large village near. The chief society which the two ladies had was in this village, about the outskirts of which were a few "good houses,"—respectable, solid dwellings, with "grounds," not sufficiently dignified to be country places, but superior to the ordinary villa or village mansion—where there lived a few retired people, a soldier or two, Indian officials on pensions, and such like, who, with the addition of the clergy and the doctor, formed the higher classes of Doveton. Lady Frogmore was much thought of in this little society. Her story, which everyone knew more or less, but about which there was always a considerable mystery, her gentleness and kindness, and not least her rank, made her always interesting to her neighbours: and notwithstanding her own complete retirement, their little neigh-



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near. The General's children
Frogmore came to the Dower
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as playing the game; while the fathers and mothers sat or strolled about, half watching, more than half occupied with their own discussions. Mary was received with open arms, placed in the best place, surrounded by a crowd of anxious courtiers who asked to be allowed to bring her tea or ice or claret cup, or anything that in such circumstances a lady could desire. Miss Hill was not so popular, for one thing because she was not Lady Frogmore, but also because Agnes was not so "sweet" as her poor sister, and with her pre-occupied mind and many cares responded less graciously to the compliments addressed to her. Miss Hill was allowed to settle herself where she pleased, and thus was easily discovered by one of the neighbouring clergy, who came up to her with an air of special cordiality, and said as he shook hands, "I am delighted to see you here. It shows how little truth there is in the rumours that one hears about young Lord Frogmore."

"About Frogmore!" cried Agnes—she had not been listening very closely until that name suddenly brought the blood to her face. "What do you know about Frogmore?"

The clergyman, surprised by her surprise, hesitated a little, but finally informed her that he had been lately at Ridding, which was the county town, and there he had heard a very alarming account—that Lord Frogmore was down with fever of the worst kind, caught during a visit to some old cottages which had been allowed to get into a dreadful state of neglect on his property, and that his life was despaired of. Dr. Barker was in constant attendance upon him, it was said, and everyone knew Dr. Barker was too busy a man to make

too much of a trifling illness. "I am only telling you what I heard," said the rector, "for of course you must know better, and it was, I confess, a great relief to my mind to see you. If he were really so ill you would not have been here——"

"I am afraid," said Agnes, "that is not so true as it appears. We keep up but very little correspondence. All the same," she cried to herself, rather than to her companion, "Letitia must have written, surely she must have written if Mar had been very ill. He is always delicate," she said.

"So I have heard."

"And you are sure it was more than that—you are sure there was something definite talked of—a fever? Oh," cried Agnes, "for the love of heaven tell me everything you know."

"I have told you everything I know, dear Miss Hill. I am very, very sorry to have made you so anxious. All that must have been an exaggeration at least. You must have heard."

"Letitia could not—she could not—oh, even she could not," cried Agnes, with great agitation; "and yet who can tell? She might say what was the use? Oh, forgive me. What you have said has made me very anxious. Typhoid fever has a horrible sound. It takes the courage out of one's heart."

"What I heard must have been an exaggeration," said the clergyman. "I wish I had not told you. People are so fond of adding a little to a piece of news. Anything to make a sensation. I daresay it is only a common cold or something unimportant. You will not tell *Lady Frogmore*?"

"Will you see if our carriage is there?" Agnes said.

She felt as if she were tottering as she walked. She could not keep on her feet. Anxiety had seized upon her like a vulture, placing all its claws in her flesh. She sat down on the nearest vacant chair, where she was exposed to the conversation of another guest, a lady who did not know many people, and who accordingly flung herself upon the person who seemed to have taken that seat out of kind consideration. But Agnes was beyond those *ménagements* of civility which she would have adopted in another case. When she had recovered a little, without observing that she was being talked to, thinking over this dreadful piece of information did not make it less but more grave. Mar had not written to her, which already had made her vaguely anxious. And who in that house would think of it? Who would take the trouble? Agnes had not the habit of those modern ways to which so many of us fly in a moment of anxiety. She did not think of the telegraph. She turned over in her distressed mind many things that she could do, but not that. She would write to Dr. Barker—she would go to him, or to the Park, where at least a servant would tell her the truth. But it was already evening, and how could she go so late? and how could she live through the dreadful night without knowing? and how could she disentangle Mary from those smiling groups, and persuade her to come home and explain to her what she wanted—what she must do? The sudden alarm without warning, without preparation—the wild, sudden panic and horror, like the shadow of death descending in a moment over her—took from her all power of thought. When at last she

was able to reach the spot where Mary sat, it was almost impossible to get her attention. Lady Frogmore was listening patiently to her neighbours, with all their little stories of the parish and village. She said little herself. That was one reason why they liked her so. She listened to everybody except to Agnes, who had at last got to the back of her chair, and who was too much herself—the other half of herself—to call her exquisite politeness forth.

"Mary, the carriage is here, and it is getting late."

Mary gave her sister a little nod and sat still, listening to Mrs. Brotherton's account of the measles, with which all her children had been "down."

"Mary, couldn't you come away now? The Howards have gone away already, and the Thomsons. And the grass is damp, and the dew beginning to fall."

"Presently," she said, with another look and nod. And now someone else had got possession of her ear.

Agnes went on whispering entreaties; but how was Mary to know there was any urgency in them more than on any other afternoon? She cried at last, in desperation—

"I am ill—I am feeling very ill. For God's sake, Mary, come away."

Lady Frogmore only waited to hear the last of what the vicar's wife was saying, and then she rose hastily and drew Agnes' arm into her own.

"My dear," she said, "why did you not tell me you had a headache before?"

CHAPTER XVII.

When the ladies got back to the Dower House, Letitia's letter was awaiting them. Agnes had not known what to say on the way. She had maintained the little fiction of the headache, with which Mary sympathized tenderly, and lay back in the corner of the carriage wondering what she should, what she could do. Endure for this night, at least, that expedient which is always the nearest to a woman, and in the morning on some pretence, with some excuse which did not yet occur to her, go in her own person and see for herself. This was all that Agnes could decide upon. And when she reached home Letitia's letter was the first thing that met her eye. She devoured it, standing in the hall, while Mary went in. A letter which carries a sentence of death may look as little important as a letter which conveys an invitation to tea, and Mary made no inquiries. That she should pass tranquilly through the hall and go into the drawing-room, while Agnes was reading of her only child's illness, struck her sister as a hideous cruelty and want of heart. She had said to herself she would disturb Mary no more, she would not attempt to awaken the feeling which had lain so long dormant, which surely was now beyond hope. But it was as a bitter offence and wrong to Agnes when Lady Frogmore went

past her with a cheerful word to the maid who came to take her shawl, and a mind entirely at ease, while Mar's fate was being sealed. For Letitia's letter left very little doubt as to the boy's fate. "I will let you know if anything happens. That is—" Agnes said to herself, with a gasp of anguish, "if he dies." Oh heaven! and he might be dying now alone with the trained nurses, nobody near him who loved him! Alas, poor Mar! who was there in the world who loved him? except, perhaps, herself, who had been the only mother his infancy had known, and she was useless to him, unable to do anything for him!

It was a long time before Agnes could face the light and her sister's tranquil looks. She went to her room and fell on her knees and prayed with that passionate remonstrance and appeal, and almost reproach, with which we fly to God when He seems about to cut off from us the thing we hold most dear—pleading, putting forth every argument, reasoning with the Supreme Disposer of events, arguing and explaining to Him how it could not, must not be—as we all do, when prayer, which is so often a mere formality, becomes the outcry of mortal disquietude. The tears which she shed, the struggle which she went through, exhausted her so, that for the moment her misery was weakened with her strength. Mary, waiting tranquilly for her downstairs, believed that Agnes had lain down a little, her head being so bad, and approved it as the wisest thing to do. "Don't disturb Miss Hill, she has a bad headache," she said. And so Agnes was left alone to have her *struggle* out.

"Are you better, dear?" said Mary, in her quiet



voice, when her sister came in, in the twilight, just before dinner. Agnes had changed her dress as usual, and in the dim light it was impossible to see how pale she was, and the signs of trouble in her face.

"I have news from Letitia," said Agnes, "bad news—they have illness at the Park. I think I will go to-morrow, if you can spare me, Mary, and see for myself."

"At the Park?" Lady Frogmore paused with nervous questions on her lips—Was it Duke? Was it anything infectious? Was it——? She paused, and instinct taught her that her sister's desire to go and see for herself could mean only one thing. The boy—— She never to herself called him anything but the boy, and never thought of him—which she did seldom and unwillingly, never when she could help it—without a strange tremor and sinking at her heart.

"Is it——?" she said, but she could not put even that formula or ask, is it he? "Is it serious?" she added in a very low voice.

"I think she thinks he is dying—and she wants no one to come—he has two nurses—and she says she will write if anything happens. If anything happens! Oh, my God, my boy! with no one near him that cares for him. I must go to-morrow, Mary."

Lady Frogmore patted her sister's shoulder with her hand. Her own child! and yet it was for Agnes that she felt—for her great trouble. "Yes," she said, "you must go," with a strange piteous tone which her sister did not understand, and indeed in the throng of her own emotions did not perceive.

"She never says a word of sorrow or regret. She *is glad, that* dreadful woman! Now," cried Agnes, "it



her way."

"In her way!" Mary not see each other's fac I wished," she said in a

Agnes seized her sist which was almost fierce cried, "you shall not no once—not Letitia, but go more's son. Oh, my boy,

She let her sister go face with her hands. An her chair. But she made She did not say anything l the cover of the evening. thing else, at least with t companion. That Agnes s outburst and beg Mary's that in her lay to appear evening, it is almost unnec with compunction and tende mother who knew nothi-

suffering from confinement, and that a little air and change of scene was necessary, as there was really no need for her and she could do nothing for Mar. She drove about with an eager eye upon the property, observing and deciding what must be done, when all was over, when everything was in their own hands. She went to Westgate, and planned where the new cottages were to be. "Your father has been tied down in every way," she said to Letty; "he has not been able to carry out his own plans. But now, alas, in all probability that period is over, and he will be able to act for himself——"

"Oh, mamma, what do you mean?" Letty had cried.

"It is very easy to tell what I mean: poor Mar—though it is dreadful to think of it: it will make a wonderful difference to your father, Letty, when the poor boy is mercifully released——"

"Do you mean," cried Letty, her eyes full of tears and horror, "when Mar, dear Mar, dies——? Is that the dreadful, dreadful thing that you mean, mamma?"

"My saying it will not make him die a moment sooner: but we must be prepared. That is what is coming, alas! However grieved we may be, that is no reason for shutting our eyes."

"Mamma! do you think it? Do you really believe it? I know he is very ill—but there is a long way between that and—dying. Oh," said Letty, with a shudder, "I cannot, cannot bear it! I will not think it, I will not believe it. What is the good of doctors and nurses, and of all the new things that have been found out, if Mar must die."

Dreadful question which we have all asked! With

neglect and ignorance every terrible loss is alas! possible—but with all that science and all that care can do, with doctors that discover new methods every day, and nursing that never rests, how is it that still they die? Letty had never faced this question before in her life. She sat by the side of her mother, whose mind was tuned to so different a mood, who was calculating in the fullest impulse of new life and activity what she was going to do—and sobbed out her youthful soul at the first sight of that inevitable fate that kings as well as beggars must pass and cannot escape.

Agnes got out of her humble cab from the station in the middle of the avenue, and walked the rest of the way to the house. Now that she was so near she instinctively pushed off the moment of certainty. The windows were all open, he was living at least, there was still hope. And even that was a relief. In the hall she found the daily bulletin placed there for inquirers. "No change; strength fairly maintained," which gave her another shock of acute consolation, if such words can be used. "But I must see him. You know me. I am Lord Frogmore's aunt," she cried. "No, I cannot wait till Mrs. Parke comes in. I must see him. I must see him." The footman called the butler, who did not know how to stop this impetuous visitor; but before he had appeared Agnes had flown upstairs, feeling a freedom in the absence of Letitia which increased the sense of relief. The nurse came to the door of Mar's room, with her fingers to her lips, as she heard the hasty footstep. It was the cheerful nurse, the optimist, who thought that young patients recover from everything. She perceived in a moment that this was no formal inquiry,

and hastened to say that the patient was "no worse." "You may think that's not much, but it's a great deal," she added, coming out into the outer room.

"Oh, nurse, God bless you! I thank you with all my heart!" cried poor Agnes, bursting out, but noiselessly, into a passion of tears.

Upon which the cheerful woman shook her head. "We must not go too fast," she said. "He is very bad. But I have never been one that took the worst side. I've seen that kind before; a long, weedy slip of a boy that's outgrown, you would say, his strength. But they're stronger than you think for. I say, while there's life there's hope."

Agnes Hill had heard these words often before, as we all have done, and looking up through her grateful tears with a fresh *accès* of misery she said, "Is that all? Oh, is that all?"

"The doctor gives him the six weeks," said the nurse pursuing her own line of thought, "but I shouldn't be surprised if there was a change to-morrow or next day. That will be five weeks. I can't tell you why I think it, but one can't be so long with a case without forming an opinion. To-morrow night or early on Thursday morning I shouldn't wonder if the change came."

"Oh, nurse, the change!" said Agnes, clasping her hands, with the full sense of the words flashing on her mind.

"Yes," said the nurse. "I can't say, and no one can say, what change it will be—but I believe the fever will go. And then—it all depends upon his strength," she added, "and I take the cheerful view."

"You think there is still hope?" said Agnes, taking the woman's hand in hers.

"Oh, plenty of hope!" said the optimist. But when the anxious visitor was allowed to come within the door, and from that corner saw Mar lying in the doze in which he spent most of his time, her heart sank within her. Nothing could look more feeble, more like death, as if he were gone already, than the waxen face of the boy, with his dark eyelashes against his cheek. She turned away and put her hands to her eyes, thinking he was already gone. What did it matter what any one said? Hope died with a pang unspeakable in the anxious woman's breast. She came away again without listening to the further words of comfort which the nurse poured into her ears. Comfort—what comfort was there possible when he lay there, gone, wasted to a shadow, shrunken to nothing, with those wide circles round his eyes, and the blue veins like streaks of colour? Agnes said to herself she had seen too many to deceive herself. She knew, whatever any one might say.

As she came down again to the hall, Letitia's carriage arrived at the door. Though Agnes was so hopeless and so entirely convinced that nothing could now avail, the sound of the carriage wheels on the gravel made her shrink and glow with indignation, as if the noise might harm him. The first words she said to Mrs. Parke were of reproach. "Couldn't you drive round another way, not to disturb him?" she said.

"Ah, you have come to see our poor Mar. No, dear boy, we don't disturb him. Nothing has disturbed *him* for a long, long time, alas!" said Letitia. The mournful motion of her head, her measured tones of

fictitious grief, gave Agnes an impulse to strike her, as a brutal man might have done, upon the lying mouth.

"Oh, Aunt Agnes," cried Letty, "stay, stay! Don't go away." There was no possibility of doubting the sincerity of Letty's wet eyes and tear-stained face.

"I am afraid I cannot ask you to do that," said Letitia. "If it had been Mary—— But there are too many people already in the house. And you could do Mar no good, Agnes; in all likelihood he will never recognize anybody—he will just sleep away. And the agitation is more than I can bear. And at such a moment it is best there should be nobody in the house but the family alone."

"I am his mother's sister," said Agnes, painfully.

"But such a mother! who has never spoken to him, never acknowledged him, would have turned him out of his rights if she could. No, he must be left now to those who have cared for him all his life."

"Oh, Letitia," she cried, in her misery, "and have you nothing to blame yourself with in that? Is your conscience clear? Don't you remember, as we all do—as we all did—for most of them are gone?" she cried, wringing her hands.

Letitia looked at her, opening her eyes wide, then gave her daughter a glance of appeal, and shook her head. "Poor thing!" she said. "Poor Agnes, it has been too much for her. This dreadful mental weakness is in the family. Tell one of the men, Letty, to get ready to take her to the station. My poor Agnes, rest here a little and Thomas shall take you to the train."

Agnes said not a word more. She turned and

hastened away, almost running to get into the shelter of her cab before the storm of wretchedness and fierce indignation, which she could scarcely keep silent so long, should burst forth. And now she was about to triumph in her wickedness, this cruel terrible woman! The stars in their courses fought for her. Mar's innocent young life, and Mary's reason, and all the misery that had been, were but steps in her advancement. And now she had all but reached the climax of her life.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AGNES got home so late that she did not see Mary that evening. And next day there was not very much conversation between them. Lady Frogmore could see by her sister's looks that she had not very cheerful news to give. She said with a sort of new-born timidity, "I hope things are better than you thought," to which Agnes made no reply but by shaking her head. It rained that day. One of those soft, long-continued summer rains which pour down from morning to night without any hope of change, refreshing and restoring everything that had begun to droop in the too fervid sun, but shutting the doors of the house against the all-pervading moisture, and making all rambles impossible. Few things are more depressing to a heart already deeply weighted than this persistent rain. The grey of the sky, the patter on the leaves, the monotony of the long hours increases every burden. Even in the happiest circumstances the prisoners indoors long for some-

thing to happen, for somebody to come. And it may be believed that to Agnes in the fever of her anxiety every hour seemed a year long. This night or to-morrow might be the decisive time. The secrets of life or death were in those slowly passing moments, the balance slowly moving to one side or another. She went through all her so-called duties, the little domestic things she had to do, the little nothings that seemed, oh, so unimportant, so futile, in face of the great thing that was about to be decided. She asked herself how she could endure to do them, to order the little dinner, to superintend the little economies while Mar lay dying. But had she been with Mar what could she have done? Sat and looked on in the most desperate suspense, still able to do nothing for him, to do nothing for anybody, to wait only till the end should come.

There came a moment, however, when the courage of Agnes failed, and she could bear it no more. She told her sister again that she had a headache, a pretence which Mary seemed to understand, asking no questions—and would go early to bed. But she did not go to bed. It seemed something to sit up, to accompany the vigil of the nurse, the possibility of the change with the intensity of feeling if not of presence. When Agnes closed her eyes she seemed to see the whole scene—the room with its shaded light, the wasted form scarcely visible in the bed; the nurse—a silent figure—watching the long hours through. She did not know that the nurse who was then with the boy was one who did not hope—which was a thing which would have added heaviness to the vigil had she known it. She had *not the* heart to go to bed. It seemed some-

how as if she were doing something for him to sit up and count the hours and spend her soul in broken breaths of prayer. Oh, how broken, how interrupted with a hundred fantastic uncontrollable imaginations! Still it was something to join herself to the vigil, if no more.

She was so absorbed in her own deep anxiety and thoughts that she did not hear any movement in the house, and thought nothing but that the household was asleep and hushed at its usual early hour. And when she heard a stealthy step come to her door after midnight, Agnes' mind was so confused from reality by that vigil that she sprang up with a breathless terror lest it might be the nurse coming to call her to tell her the change had come, and that Mar's life was fading away. She made a swift step to the door and opened it, unable to speak; but only found Lady Frogmore's maid outside with an anxious face.

"Oh, Miss Hill, I'm so glad you're up," she said; "I wish you would come to my lady—she is not herself at all. I can't tell what is the matter with her."

"Hasn't she gone to bed, Martin?"

"I got her to bed, ma'am, quite comfortable I thought; but I stopped about doing little things, for I saw she was wakeful; and then all at once she got up and called me and caught me by the arm. 'Martin,' she says, looking into my face very serious, 'who was it that said, May he grow up an idiot and kill you? Who was it, who was it?' 'Oh, my lady, I don't know,' I said; 'I never heard the words before.' 'It was a dreadful thing to say,' she cries, always looking at me. 'Martin, do you think words like that ever come true?'

Perhaps I was too bold, Miss Hill; but I spoke up and said, 'No, my lady, I'm sure they don't; for if they did God Almighty would be putting us in the power of the worst and dreadfullest—and He would never do that.' 'No, Martin, He would never do that,' she said, with the tears in her dear eyes. Oh, Miss Hill, there's some change coming. I don't know what it is. And now she's trying all her keys upon that box we brought from the Park. We've not been able to find one that would open it; but I got another bunch just now, and while she was busy I thought I'd come and call you. Don't be frightened, Miss Hill. I don't think it's a change for the worse."

"Oh, Martin," said Agnes, "it is just the bitterness of life. It's a change that will come too late. Oh, my boy! it must be his dear spirit that is moving his mother's heart."

"Let's hope it's something better than that. Let's hope it means good news," said the woman, who knew a great deal of the family in her long service, and nearly, if not all, its mysteries. But Agnes, whose heart was very heavy, only shook her head. When she went into her sister's room, Mary was standing against the light, a white figure wrapped in a white dressing-gown. Her partial confusion of mind, the subdued and quiet life she had led, her exemption from strong emotions, had kept an air of comparative youth about her. Her hair was almost white, but it gave no appearance of age to the face, which had the appearance of one purified and refined from earthliness by long misfortune and trouble. She had lighted a number of candles, which encircled her with light, and was standing look-

ing down into the box which was open on the table with a strange air of tremulous discovery, indecision, terror and joy, like one who has found out some astonishing thing which she cannot believe yet knows to be true. She turned half round with a warning movement, as if begging not to be disturbed, then suddenly putting out her hand drew Agnes close to her. "What is that? Do you know what it is?" she said.

The only answer Agnes made was with a burst of tears: "Oh, Mary! Oh, my dear! my dear!" she cried.

A smile was on Mary's face—a strange tender smile, full of all the softness of her veiled and gentle soul. She took out something tenderly and reverently, as if it had been a sacred thing. The curious nurse, peering behind these two absorbed women, expecting to see some mystery, felt herself to come down from imaginative poetic heights to the commonest familiar ground when she saw what it was. Martin almost laughed with the surprise, but dared not, so strong was the sensation of passionate feeling that seemed to fill the air. What Lady Frogmore took from the box was the first little garment that is ever put on a child. A little film of lawn, not much more; the most delicate and softest of fabric made to fold over the delicate body, in exquisite softness and whiteness, as if the finest fairy web of earth had been chosen to wrap the little thing new-born, come from among the angels. It was unfinished—a narrow line of very fine lace only half-sewn round the little sleeves. Mary took it up and held it in her hands, spread out upon them. Oh, what soft suggestions of trembling happiness, of wonderful anticipation, of tender mystery, and dreams were in it!

"What is this?" she said, in a whisper; "tell me what it is."

Agnes had put her arms round her sister, leaning upon her—she who was usually the strong one, the supporter and prop—and laid her head on Mary's shoulder. The sight of the little tender relic, so familiar, so full of suggestion, on this night of fate, overcame her altogether. Oh, to think of the infant for whom that little wrapper of softness had been made; whom his mother, who had made it with such holy and tender thoughts, had never known; who was lying now between life and death, perhaps having crossed the awful boundary, lingering near them, breathing into her long-closed and stupefied heart! Agnes could make no answer. She sobbed convulsively upon her sister's shoulder. "Oh, my baby, my boy, my little Mar, my little Mar!" she cried, with a poignant tone of anguish which pierced the soft air, and the soft silence of the night, like something keen and terrible, a sharp blade and point of passionate human feeling.

Mary held up the stronger woman with a rally of her own strength, but did not move otherwise. Her eyes were full of tears, but there was no anguish in them. She said in a low voice, like the coo of a dove, "No one need tell me. I know. It was I who made it for my baby—my baby! And he was born. I remember now everything. The old mother was there—my mother—don't you know—and so proud. And my old lord, my dear old lord—with his heir—— Agnes, Agnes!" she cried, suddenly, "what have you done to me, to keep me so long from my boy?"

Agnes sank down upon her knees on the floor. She

held up her clasped hands as if she were praying to the white figure that stood over her. "It can do no harm now," she cried. "What does it matter if we all go mad? I think I shall: to see her remember him, to see her find out the truth too late—too late! Oh, God, that I should have my answer now when it is all over. It would have been better if there had been no answer —no answer at all!"

"Agnes," said Mary, gently laying a hand upon her head. She held the precious little garment in her other hand, and kissed it, pressing it to her lips and her cheek. "Agnes," she said in her soft voice, pitying her sister's emotion, "I do not blame you, dear. I have been kept in the dark, I don't know why; I have done many strange things not knowing. Perhaps my—my baby—my boy has been injured; God forbid. But I don't blame you, dear. If he has been injured we can put it right. All can be put right now we know. You meant it, I am sure, for the best. Agnes, I never, never will blame you, dear. Oh, rise up now and tell me, tell me all you have kept from me; tell me everything about my boy."

"I think God has taken him," cried Agnes on her knees. "This was the night—I think he must be here to have found his way to his mother's heart. Oh Mar, Mar! if you are dead, if you hear, say something, let us see you one moment, one moment before you go to heaven. One moment, one moment, Mar!"

The maid who was standing by, and whom these words froze with terror, thought to her dying day that she had heard something, she knew not what, like the passing of a soft footstep, like a subdued breath, and

would have turned and fled had she not thought herself safer in the room with the lights than in the dark passages outside. This impulse of terror was stopped in Martin's mind by the look her mistress gave her—which was a look which Martin had exchanged with many persons over Lady Frogmore's own head—a look of pity and appeal, consulting her what was to be done for the distracted woman at their feet. This curious turning of the tables stupefied Martin. It was as if an infant from its cradle had turned and bid its nurse care for its mother.

"All this has been too much for her," said Lady Frogmore. "Help me to put her in my bed, Martin. She and I have always been together. We slept together when we were two little girls in the old vicarage. Agnes, let me lift you, dear; don't strain yourself or take any trouble. We'll stay together this wonderful night. And when you're able you will tell me; let me lift you first——"

"You!" cried Agnes, stumbling somehow to her feet. She added in a humble tone, coming to herself, "I have forgotten my duty, Mary. Don't think any more of me. It was more than I could bear, just for a moment."

"Yes, I saw it was too much. Martin, do you think you could sleep on the sofa, just to be at hand if we wanted anything? I am not easy about her still. We'll stay together to-night. Lie down and I will sit by you, and when you are able you will tell me——"

"My lady, it would be much better for you to get your natural rest."

"Mary, you must not sit up with me!"

"And why not, I should like to know?" said Mary. "Don't you know I'm very happy to-night. Don't you know I've found it out what has been on my mind so long. I knew there was something. I have never said anything to you, but it has been, oh so heavy on my mind! Something, something that has gone away from me that I could not get back, and when I dreamt of my old lord he was always frowning, always angry. Agnes! I was making this, and mother sitting as there, and you pouring out tea, when— We were all very happy—I remember my thread breaking just there, when I had nearly finished. And I turned to take another, and— Then there was something that happened before—before he was born."

"He was born that night," cried Agnes, "God bless him!" She was very pale, and her eyes had become dry and shone as if with fever. In her mind there was a deep wonder whether Mar heard her, whether it would please him, though he was dead, to have the story of his infancy told to his mother. And with this half distracted thought came one that was quite real, quite rational; the anxious determination to shut out all reference to Letitia's visit from the still wavering mind of her sister; to keep that, which was the key of all that followed, from her recollection if possible.

"He was born that night—God bless him!" said Mary slowly. Then she added, "I remember a cluster of people bending over him, and the light on father's bald head, and my dear old lord with his face down quite close, and the doctor standing saying something about the child. And then—and then—what happened? I remember no more."

"You were very ill, oh very ill; so ill that— Oh," said Agnes, "don't make me think of that terrible time."

"Ah!" said Mary, a quiet seriousness coming over her face, though her lips still smiled, "you thought I was going to die?"

Agnes made no reply.

"But even that," said Lady Frogmore, "was not enough to make you all deceive me so cruelly. No, no, my dear, I did not mean cruelly. You must have thought it for the best. One can but do what one thinks is for the best. Was there ever such a thing before that a woman should live and never know? Do you remember what the Bible says, 'Can a woman forget her child, that she should not remember——"

"Oh," cried the poor soul, "what you have taken from me! How much you have robbed me of!" She paused a moment with her hands clasped, with the consciousness of wrong on her face. Then that sterner mood died away in the old sweet way of making the best of it, which Agnes remembered with a melting of her heart had always been Mary's way. "Never mind," she said. "Never mind. I know now, and you meant it all for the best."

CHAPTER XIX.

Mary sat by the bed in which Agnes lay for nearly half the night. She was so determined on this strange arrangement that her sister had to yield, and as long as the darkness lasted, which in July moves slowly, much more than in June, the conversation went on. Martin lay on the sofa in a distant corner and slept soundly, but neither of the ladies had any inclination to sleep. It distracted the thoughts of Agnes from the possible awful importance of this night in Mar's life to tell Mar's mother everything that had happened, dwelling as briefly as possible upon the illness which had separated Mary from her child, and endeavouring to blur over as best she could the blank which that illness had left behind in Mary's mind. It was indeed a very broken story, in which a stranger wanting information would have seen the most serious gaps and deficiences. But to Mary the interest of the details in which Agnes took refuge to avoid the more serious questions, was so great that it was always possible to carry her past a dangerous point: and the murmurs of the two voices going on all through the night, low, breathed into each other's ears, was more like the whisperings of two girls over their little secrets of love than the clearing up of what was almost a tragedy, the revelation of the strangest, troublous story. Mary herself was lost in a still vague

and tremulous joy, all innocent and soft as the little garment that had been the happy cause of it, possessing as yet no complications, realizing nothing but that she had been proved to have the dearest of all possessions to a woman—a child, a baby, who to her thoughts was a baby still, and at present linked himself but dimly to any idea of further developments. To be told that he was Mar, still gave little enlightenment to her mind, which did not know Mar. Something that could be wrapped still in that little film of innermost apparel—although it was at the same time something which could consciously respond to her affection, reflect his father's image as Agnes said he did—something that was at once a loving human creature and an infant entirely her own. This was Mary's conception of the child whom she had discovered as if it had been a jewel that was lost. She was not shaken by her discovery as had been feared. She took it sweetly, quietly, as was natural to her gentle soul. Happily it had come without any harsh discovery, in the gentlest way, and as yet there seemed nothing but happiness in the lifting of the veil, the opening up of the old life. Mary cried as she sat and listened, shedding many soft tears. Her eyes shone behind them with joy and peace. She had found what she had lost. No more would her old lord frown upon her in her dream; no more would she feel that imperfection, that something which she could not understand, the mystery which had haunted her life, though she did not know what it was. She could not, perhaps would not, for even in this feeble state there is some moral control, allow herself to think further. It was *enough* that she had come out of the darkness,



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a platform of weakness and
weak nor at any disadvanta
Her sister, who had ministe
lay silent, looking on while s
drew the curtain over the w
bed," she said, "if you will r
not because I am tired, for I
for ever, but because we must
and I suppose rest is necessar
of it," she said, with a soft l
feel young and strong as if I c
about twenty, Agnes. But m
think I shall sleep. It is like
she took her place by her sist
times, when the little girls we
you remember the time when
girls?"

They kissed each other, la
that old recollection

deep repose in which she was wrapped, Agnes stole out of bed and went to the furthest window where there was a glimmer of the rising sun, and knelt down there in the dawning ray, turning her face towards the east. Why, she could not have told. To turn her face towards the east was no spell, there was nothing in that to secure that her prayers should be heard. And it could not be said that she prayed. Her soul and body were both worn out. She knelt there silent, her head bowed in her hands. The new day was bringing life or death to Mar—which was it bringing, life or death? She knelt on silent, like an image of devotion. It was something at least to await that crisis, when it should come, upon her knees.

Lady Frogmore slept till it was late, long after Agnes had dressed and come upstairs again to await at her bedside her sister's awakening with a little anxiety after all the excitement of the night. Mary had lain very still; she had not moved for hours, and was sleeping like a child. But when she began to give signs of waking, her appearance changed. She moved about uneasily, her face contracted as if with pain; she put out her hands as if appealing to some one. Suddenly she sprang up broad awake in her bed. "Martin!" she cried, and then "Agnes!" as she perceived her sister. Her breath came quick, a look of terror came over her face. "Who was it?" she cried, "Who was it—that said 'May he grow up an idiot, and kill you——' Who was it, Agnes?"

"Oh, my lady, my lady!" cried Martin from the other side of the bed.

"Mary! don't think of that, for God's sake."

"Who was it?" she cried. "It was to me it was said."

"Oh, my lady," said Martin, "don't think of such dreadful things."

"'May he grow up an idiot—and kill you—' It was said to me—it was a curse upon my baby—my child! Who said it, Agnes?—you know."

"Oh, Mary, what does it matter now? What harm could such wicked words do to any one? Yes—yes, it is true. Mary, I ought not to tell you, it was Letitia. Oh, what does it matter now?"

Mary pushed her away, flinging herself out of her bed. "Not matter! Martin, let me dress at once. Order the carriage: what is the first train. We must go at once by the first train."

"Where, Mary? Oh, my dear, where?"

"She asks me where?" cried Lady Frogmore, appealing in her excitement to the maid. "She asks me where, and she knows my boy is in that woman's hands—my child in that woman's hands: She said, may he grow up an idiot—my child, my baby! and he is in her hands. Oh, quick, quick, give me my things! Order the carriage! There is a train, early, that we went by before. Oh, the slow, horrible train it is, I remember, stopping everywhere; but at least don't let us lose it now."

"Is it to the Park you are going, Mary?"

"Where else?" cried Lady Frogmore; "is not my child there? and in her hands." She was too impatient to accept the usual services of her maid, but dressed herself in wild haste, her trembling hands tying strings and fastening buttons all wrong. Her two attendants could do little but look on as in her agitation she

snatched at everything. The gentle Mary, always so tranquil and mild, was transfigured with passion and eagerness. When she heard that it was too late for the morning train, it was a shriek rather than a cry which burst from her breast. "Oh, why did you let me sleep? Why did I sleep?" she cried bitterly. There was no possibility of calming her, no means of explaining how they had arranged everything for her comfort that she might rest after unusual excitement and exhaustion. She, rest! Mary, who had been the object of unceasing care for years, whose every mood had been considered, and from whom everybody near warded and kept off any possible shade of annoyance, forgot all that in a moment. She became the Mary of old, she who was Letitia's right hand, she who spared no trouble, who thought of everybody but herself. Mary was as much surprised at being the first to be thought of, at having her rest cared for, as if that long time of care and observance had never been. "Rest for me?" she cried. "You should have known better, Agnes—you might have known I should not rest till I have seen my boy." She woke without a cloud upon her memory of that fact, but with this new dread springing up in her mind which could not be calmed down. They set off in time for a later train after a weary interval of waiting, an interval that seemed to both as if it would never end. Mary had been seized in the new sense of motherhood with a panic and fear of alarm which nothing could quench. She who had forgiven everything to Letitia, who had thought of nothing either in her madness or her recovery but the interests of her former friend, now feared her as if she were a criminal, and felt that every moment

the heir remained in her hands was a moment of danger. "She will do him no harm," Agnes tried to say. "She is not kind. She does not love him, but she will do him no harm." Mary would not listen to this voice of reason. The woman who had wished that the unborn child might grow up an idiot and kill his parents appeared in no light but that of a possible murderess to her who had newly discovered his existence and that she was his mother. She waved off her sister's soothing words. She put Agnes herself—Agnes who had loved him always, who had been his first guardian, all the mother he had ever known—in a secondary place as one who could not divine the passion of the mother love. "It is easy for you to speak," she said, crying out in her impatience that the horses crept, that they would be too late for the train, and then that the train itself was like a country cart, and would not go. Then there came those long waitings at the junctions, the interval between one little country conveyance and another. The rain of yesterday had all passed away. The day was bright, illuminating the face of the country, mocking at the heaviness of the travellers. Lady Frogmore was flushed and eager, full of enquiry, walking about during the times of waiting, explaining to everybody that she was going to her son, to bring him home, to the great confusion of those who knew her story, and knew too that Mar lay dying. Her acquaintances looked at her with trouble and suspicion, looked anxiously aside at Martin, who followed her mistress about as she walked up and down. Had poor Lady Frogmore's brain given way again? was what they asked each other with their eyes. But it was none of their

business, and there was no one important enough to interfere.

As for Agnes, she was incapable of any activity. When she was permitted to be quiet for a moment there fell upon her heart the other dreadful burden which Mary had not understood, which Agnes shrank from insisting upon. Was it all too late, too late, a terrible irony of Providence which sometimes seems to keep the word of promise to the ear, as well as the pagan fates, to give when the gift is no longer of any use? Was his mother hurrying in all the new passion of her love and trust to find no child, no son, but only what was mortal, the poor cast-off garment of flesh that had once been her boy? Was it all over, that struggle? or had it perhaps ended, as the nurse hoped, in life and not in death? As she approached the time when she should know, Agnes' mind began to play with this hope: tremulous gleams of happiness and possibility flashing before her eyes, which she dared not receive or dwell upon, but which came to her without any will of hers, flaming through the dark, lighting up the skies, then sinking into greater gloom than ever. While Mary walked about in the intervals of waiting, Agnes sat out of sight in the most retired corner she could find, dumb and faint with the awful suspense. She could not communicate to her sister what she feared, yet feared doubly for the consequence to Mary if in the heat of her newly awakened feeling she should come suddenly against that thick blank of loss. Oh, to forestall the next turn, to know what a few hours might bring forth—happiness, the perfection of being, a new life, a brighter world—or madness, misery and death? Thus the one sister sat

dumb and incapable of speech, her throat dry and her lips parched, while the other, all energy and eagerness, soothed her impatience by movement and eager communication of her purpose—going to find her boy.

The railways have almost annihilated distance everybody says, and it is true. But when a succession of slow country trains on cross lines have to be gone through, with many pauses, stoppages, and changes, there is nothing which gives the same impression of delay and miserable tardihood. To haste for a little time towards your end, and then to stop and spend as long a time or longer in aimless waiting, repeating the same again and again in an afternoon's journey! No wagon on the country road seems to be so slow, so lingering, so impossible to quicken. It was dark when they arrived at the nearest station to the Park, and then a long interval followed before they could obtain the broken-down rattling, clattering country fly which drove them six miles further to the Park. It was all that Agnes' lips could do to utter an inquiry "How is Lord Frogmore?" when the keeper of the lodge woke up out of his first sleep, stumbled forth to open the gate, half reluctant to admit visitors at such an hour. "I think I heard as the young lord's a bit better," said the yawning lodge-keeper. Her heart leapt up, almost choking her in her sudden relief. But how did she dare to trust this indifferent outsider, who cared nothing? At least, at least, he lived still, which was much. Mary had grown quite silent in the excitement of the arrival. She put her hand into her sister's and grasped it as if to keep herself up, but said nothing. They dismounted out of the noisy fly at the end of the avenue, Mary

obeying the impulse of Agnes, asking no reason. There were still lights about the upper windows, and a glimmer in the hall, the door of which was opened to them by a servant who was in waiting, and who at first looked as if he would refuse them admittance, but gave way at the sight of the two ladies. He gave Agnes in a subdued whisper the bulletin, "A little better—fever diminished," which in the instantaneous and unspeakable relief, took all strength and power to move from her after all her sufferings. She leaned back upon Martin, nearly fainting, her eyes closing, her limbs refusing to support her. In that moment Lady Frogmore drew her hand from her sister's. She asked no questions. No weakness or sinking of heart or courage was in her. She neither looked nor spoke to any one round her, but swiftly detaching herself, throwing off her cloak, disappeared up the great, partially-lighted staircase as swift and as noiseless as a ghost.

CHAPTER XX.

THE day after the hurried visit of Agnes to the Park had been one of gathering darkness, and exhaustion to the young sufferer. He was so ill and had been ill so long that the interest of the household had almost come to an end. There was nothing to be done for him, not even the beef tea to prepare, the variety of drinks which had kept up a certain link of service between the sick-room and the rest of the house. All that seemed over. He had passed from the necessities of life while still

living, and now there was nothing but a half-impatient waiting—a longing of strained nerves and attention for the end of the suspense—till all should be over, and the little tale told out.

Letitia, who felt herself the chief person involved, did not feel even impatient that day. It was by this time a foregone conclusion, a question of time. The doctor even had said scarcely anything, had only shaken his head, and even the cheerful nurse, the woman of daylight and good hope, was daunted, and did not repeat her better auguries. John, who had avoided his wife, who had refused to discuss the subject, now let her speak, sitting with his head bent on his breast, and making little reply, but still listening to what she said. She had a great many plans, indeed had drawn out in her active mind a whole scheme of proceedings for their future guidance, of changes to be made both for pleasure and profit, things of much more importance than these alterations in the house on which she had set her mind the first time she came into it. Letitia spoke low, but she spoke boldly, bidding her husband remember that though it was very sad it was a thing that had always been necessary to look forward to, and that after all it was his just inheritance that was now coming to him. And John had not stopped her to-day. It was all true enough. The poor boy had been an interruption to the course of events, and now things were returning to their natural course. He had a soft heart, and it was sore for Mar; but Letitia had reason on her side, and what she said was not to be refuted or despised.

She was very busy that day, not going out for her drive or receiving any visitors, not even any of the

anxious inquirers who came to beg for a little more information than the bulletin gave—the clerical people about, and the nearest neighbours, whom hitherto she had allowed to enter; very busy in her own room planning out a great many things. It would make a change to everybody—a different style of living, a great extension and amplification would now not only be possible but necessary. She put it all down on paper, making out her arrangements systematically, which was an exercise that she loved. If the poor boy lingered for a week longer that would make no difference after all. She had promised to Duke to send for him if Mar became worse; but she decided that she would not do so, for what would be the good? Mar was far too weak to take an interest in any one, perhaps even to recognize his cousin. And Letitia felt that she could not bear the noisy grief with which her son would no doubt receive the news, which was the best news for him that could possibly be. It was bad enough to see Letty with her red eyes moping about the house, and Tiny devoting herself to her lessons as if the mortification of her soul over them was more appropriate to the crisis than anything she cared for. Little fools! who did not know what was to their advantage! But even to them it would not make the difference it would make to Duke. For Duke there could be no doubt it was the one thing to be desired; yet Letitia knew he would make a greater fuss than even the girls were doing, and this she could not bear.

Next morning she was a little later than usual in leaving her room. She had not slept well. Her mind had been so full of all that she had to do. It was not

anxiety that kept her awake, for anxiety had almost left her in the certainty of what was going to happen; but merely the preoccupation of her mind and the responsibility on her shoulders of seeing that everything was done in this emergency so as to secure the approval of the world. Though her mind was full of exultation, she was most anxious not to show it; not to be spoken of as heartless or worldly. A slight fear that she had committed herself to the attendants of the sick-room, and that they had penetrated her true feelings, troubled her a little; but what did a couple of nurses matter? She was so late that morning that she did not as usual see the night nurse, with her lugubrious countenance, shaking her head as she went to take her necessary rest. Letitia liked the night nurse best. She had always thought the other too hopeful; but what did it matter now what one thought or the other? She went direct to the sick-room when she left her own, putting on as she went the necessary solemnity of countenance with which to receive what there could be no doubt would be bad news. It startled her a little to hear an unusual murmur of voices in the ante-room where the doctor was in the habit of pausing to give his directions. She could not hear what they said, but there was something in the tone of the consultation which struck her, like a sudden dart thrown from some unseen hand. What did it mean? She went into the room quickly, her composure disturbed, though she would not allow herself to think there was any reason. What reason could there be? The first thing Letitia saw was the nurse crying—the cheerful nurse—the fool of an optimist who had always said he would get better. Ah!

all was over then? This woman had the folly to allow herself to get interested in the case; and, besides, might well be crying too for the end of a good job. A spirit of malice and fierce opposition somehow sprung up in Letitia's mind, and prompted this mean thought. Yes, it was the end of a good job, of good feeding and good pay, and very easy work. No wonder she cried; and to make herself interesting, too, in the doctor's eyes. This flashed through Mrs. Parke's mind in a second, while she was walking into the room. It broke up her calm, but rather with a fierce impulse of impatience and desire to take the hussy by the shoulders than with any real fear.

The doctor was stooping over the table writing a prescription. A prescription! What did they want with such a thing now? He looked up when he heard her step. His face was beaming. He put down his pen and came forward, holding out both hands. "I have the best of news for you this morning, my dear lady," he said.

Letitia was too much startled to speak. She would not, could not permit herself to believe her eyes. She drew her hands impatiently from his clasp.

"The crisis has come—and passed," he said. "The fever has gone. I find his temperature almost normal, and the pulse quite quiet."

"What?" said Letitia. She could not believe her ears. She had no time to regulate her countenance, to look as if she were glad. Her jaw fell, her eyes glared. "What?" she said, and she could say no more.

"I do not wonder you are overcome. I feel myself

as if it were too much. Sit down and take a moment to recover——"

She sat down mechanically and glared at him.

Her feeling was that if there had been a knife on the table she would have struck at him with it—a sharp one that would have turned that smile into a grimace and made an end of it. Too much! The fever gone, *gone!* She panted for breath, fiercely, like a wild beast.

"It is wonderful, but it is true," said Dr. Barker. He added after a moment: "It is curious the different ways we take it. This good little woman, who always hoped the best—cries: and you, Mrs. Parke, you——"

"Do you mean that he will live?" Letitia said.

"I hope so—I hope so. The only danger now is weakness; if we can feed him up and keep him quiet. It is all a question of strength——"

"You have said that ever since you were called in."

"Ah, yes, that is true, but in a different sense. Strength to struggle with a fever is one thing; strength to pick up when it is gone is another. Yesterday, every moment the fire was flaming, burning out his life—now every moment is a gain. Look at him. He's asleep. He hasn't been asleep, to call sleeping—not honest sleep—for days and nights."

All this was but as the blowing of the wind to Letitia. She did not hear the words. She heard only over and over again, "the fever is gone——" But by this time she had begun to call her strength to her, to remember dully that she must not betray herself. She interrupted the doctor in the midst of his phrase.

"Do you mean that he will live?" she said again.

"As long, I hope," said the doctor, promptly, "as his best friends could desire."

"I don't seem to understand," Letitia said. "I thought all hope was over. I thought he was dying. Why did you make me think so—and my husband, too?"

"I am sorry if I have given you unnecessary pain, Mrs. Parke——"

"Oh, unnecessary! it was all unnecessary, I suppose. You have—you have frightened us for nothing, Dr. Barker; given us such days — and nights." She broke into a little wild laugh. "And all the time there was nothing in it!" she cried.

The nurse had dried her eyes and was staring at this strange exhibition, and Letitia had begun to perceive that she had got out of her own control, and could not recover the command of her words and looks. She had been so taken by surprise, so overwhelmed by the sudden shock that the commotion in her brain was like madness. It was all she could do not to shriek out, to fly at the spectators like a wild cat. How dared they look and see what she had not the strength to conceal?

"I will go," she said, "and call John; he will tell you what he thinks," with the impulse of a maddened woman to bring a man's strength into her quarrel and punish her adversary. What she thought John could do to Dr. Barker she did not know; and indeed she did not go to tell John. She returned to her room which she had left only a few minutes before, and from which she chased the frightened housemaids with a stamp on the floor which made them fly wildly, leaving

brooms and dusters behind. The windows were all open, the sunshine bursting in in a great twinkling of light after yesterday's rain. She locked the door that she might be alone, and closed the windows one after another with a sound like thunder. To give expression to the rage that devoured her was something, a necessity, the only way of getting out her passion. The fever gone, the fever gone! the fever which was her friend, which had worked for her, which had promised everything — everything that her heart desired. And they looked her in the face and told her it was gone! the fools and hypocrites, that vile woman crying in her falseness, the man triumphing over her, pretending to congratulate her when he must have known—— How could they help knowing? They must have known! They had done it on purpose to make her betray herself, to surprise her thoughts, to exult over her. And she had been so sure, so easy in her mind, so certain that everything was going well! Oh, oh!—her breath of rage could command no more expression than that common monosyllable. She could not appeal to God as people do in such wild shocks of passion. It was not God who could be appealed to. The other perhaps if she had known how—there are times when devil-worship might be a relief if it could be done.

"My God!" said Dr. Barker, who was not so restrained. "She is wild with disappointment and rage. Did she wish the boy to die?"

"Oh, doctor—she wished her own boy to be in his place," said the nurse, who perhaps had a semi-maternal light upon the matter. The doctor kept on shaking his head as he finished his prescription.

"Don't wake him for this or anything—not even for food; but give him the food as I told you."

"I know, I know," said the nurse, on whom the overstrain of her nerves was telling, too; "don't you think I know, sir, how important it is."

"Don't you go off, too—don't leave him for a moment. Avoid all noise or discussion. Try and keep everyone out, especially——" He did not finish his sentence, but it was unnecessary.

"All I can do, doctor—all I can do. But Mrs. Parke is the mistress of the house."

"She will not come back again," he said, "she will be in a terrible fright when she knows how she betrayed herself. Poor thing! as you say, it was to put her boy in his place. They were wild before when this boy was born. Well, perhaps there is some excuse for them."

"But you will come back to-night?"

"I should think so, indeed," he said, "and before to-night. And I shall see John Parke as I go."

But by that strange influence which nobody can explain, before the doctor left the room the news had somehow flashed through the house. The fever gone! John Parke came out into the hall as Dr. Barker came downstairs. "Is it true?" he said. It would be vain to assert that there was not a dull throb which was not of pleasure or gratitude through John Parke's being when that rumour had come to him. The cup was dashed from his lips again, and this time for ever. He had to pause a moment in the library, where he was sitting, thinking involuntarily of the new life, to gulp down something—which shamed him to the bottom of his heart. But when he came out to meet the doctor that

very shock had brought all his tenderer feelings back. "Is it true?" he said with a quiver of emotion in his voice. And at that moment Letty came flying in from the park and flung herself upon his neck, and kissed him like a whirlwind. "Oh, papa, Mar's better!" she said, her voice between a soft shout and song of joy ringing through the great house. There was no doubt, no hesitation in Letty's rapture and thankfulness. And it was with almost as true a heart, notwithstanding his momentary pang of feeling, that John grasped the doctor's hand and said "Thank God."

How the news ran through the house! It was known before it was ever spoken at all to the cook, who immediately rose from the retirement in which she was considering her menu, and ordered a delicate young chicken to be prepared to make soup. "I know what's wanted after a fever. Something hevery hour," said that dignitary. It swept up like a breeze to the housemaids upstairs busy with their work. "Oh, that's what's put the Missis in such a passion," they said with unerring logic. Tiny, released from her lessons by the same instinctive consciousness of something, danced a wild jig round the hall to the tune of "Mar's better. Mar's better!" all her hair floating about her, and her shoes coming off in her frenzy. And thus nature and human feeling held the day and reigned triumphant, notwithstanding the fierce tragedy, indescribable, terrible—a passion which rent the very soul, and to which no crime, no horror was impossible, which raged and exhausted itself in the silence, shut up with itself and all devilish impulses in the best room, in the bosom of the mistress of the house.

CHAPTER XXI.

LETITIA was a long time in her room, and was not visible at all downstairs during the moment of gladness which changed the aspect of everything. Her door remained locked all the morning, and the housemaids were shut out, unable to "do" the room, which was the most curious interruption of all the laws of life. The bed was not made, nor anything swept nor dusted at noon, when she appeared downstairs—a thing which had never happened before in the house, which never happens in any respectable house except in cases of illness. Missis' room, too, the most important of all! Nobody saw what went on inside in those two long hours. Perhaps only John divined the struggle which was going on in his wife's mind, and he but imperfectly, having little in his own nature of the poison in hers. And John took very good care not to disturb Letitia. He would neither go himself nor let Letty go to make sure that her mother knew the good news about Mar, or to see if she were ill or anything wrong. She was sure to know, he said; and no doubt she had something to do which kept her in her room. But there was also no doubt that he was somewhat nervous himself at her long disappearance. Two hours she was invisible, which for the mother of a family and the mistress of a house is a very long time. When she came downstairs she had her bonnet on and was going out. She had ordered

the brougham though it was a very bright and warm day, and announced that she was going to Ridding for some shopping she had to do, but wanted no one to go with her—nor were they to wait luncheon for her should she be late.

"You have heard of course, Letitia, about Mar," John said, as he came out with his old-fashioned politeness to put his wife into the carriage.

"Is there anything new about Mar!" she said, with a sort of disdain.

"Oh, mamma, he's better! the fever is gone, he is going to get well," cried Tiny, who was still dancing about the hall.

"Is that all?" said Mrs. Parke, "I heard that hours ago"—and she drove away without a smile, without a word of satisfaction, or even pretended satisfaction—her face a blank as if it had been cut out of stone. They watched the carriage turn the corner into the avenue with a chill at their hearts. "Was mamma angry?" Tiny asked. John Parke made no answer to his child's question, but went back to the library, and took up his paper with a heavy heart. He had felt it himself, more shame to him, more or less: a sort of horrible pang of disappointment: but she—it troubled him to divine how she must be feeling it. What awful sensations and sentiments were in her heart? It was not for herself, John said, trying to excuse her—it was for Duke and for him. If she only would understand that he did not mind, that he was glad, very glad, that his brother's son was getting better, that Mar was far too much like his own child to make his recovery anything but a happy circumstance! John's heart ached for that unmoving

fixed face. Oh, if she could be persuaded that neither Duke nor he would have been happy in the promotion that came through harm to Mar!

Letitia sank back in the corner of the brougham where nobody could see. She had been in almost a frenzy of rage and pain, walking about the room, throwing herself on the sofa and even on the floor in the abandonment of her fierce misery, hurting herself like a passionate child. No shame, no pride had restrained her. She had locked her door and closed her windows and given herself up to the paroxysm which would have been shameful if any one had seen it—yet which gave a certain horrible relief to the sensations that rent her to pieces. To have it all snatched from her hands again when she had made up her mind to it, when everything was so certain! To be proved a fool, a fool, again trusting in a chance which never would come! It seemed to Letitia that God was her enemy, and a malignant one, exulting in her disappointment, laughing at her pangs. She was too angry, too cruelly outraged to be content with thinking of chance, or that it was her luck, as some people say. She wanted someone to hate for it—someone whose fault it was, whom she could revile and affront and defy to his face. The deception of circumstances, the disappointment of hopes, the cruel way in which she had been lulled into security only to be the more bitterly awakened from her illusion, made her mad. Not as Mary had been made mad, not with any confusion of mind, but with a horrible and intense subversion, a sense of being at war with everything, and living only to revenge herself upon God and man. She had revenged herself upon herself first of all,

beating her head against the wall, digging her nails into her flesh, because she had been such a fool, oh, such a fool! as to believe that what she wished was to be. And then there formed in her mind an awful thought, a movement of resistance, a refusal to be overthrown. She would not, she would not allow herself to be played with, to be beaten, to be foiled, to have the cup snatched from her lips just when she was about to drink. No, she would not submit! Though God was the Master, yet there were ways of overcoming Him—yes, there were ways of overcoming. Though He said life, a human creature though so weak, if she had but courage enough, could say death, and He would not be able to prevent it. In the madness of her disappointment and rebellion there came into Letitia's mind a suggestion, an idea. It did not seem so much in order to have her own will, and her own advantage, as in order to get the better of God, who had shaped things the other way. He thought, perhaps, there was nothing she could do, that she would have to bear it. No, then! she would not! He should see—He was a tyrant. He had the power; but there were ways of baffling Him—there was a way——

Never in all Letitia's struggles had this thought come into her mind before. Mar had been helpless in her hands for years, but her arm had never armed itself against him. She had never sought to harm him. If she had exaggerated and cultivated his weakness it had been half, as she said, in a kind of scornful precaution, that nothing might happen to him in her house, and half from a grudge, lest he should emulate her own sturdy boys, over whom he had so great and undeserved an advantage. She had never thought of

harming him. After, when he was really ill, when Providence itself (for her mind could be pious when this influence which shapes events was on her side) had seemed to arrange for his removal, as she piously said, to a better world, it would have been more than nature had not her mind rushed forward to that evidently approaching conclusion which would make so great a difference. Oh, the difference it would make! enough to deaden the sense of pity, to sharpen every covetous desire. But still she had not thought of doing anything to secure the end she desired. No, no! all the other way—nothing had been neglected, nothing refused that could help him—nothing except her desire, her strong unspoken wish, had been against him. And what had that to do with the issue one way or the other? A woman cannot pray to God that a boy may die. Thus the only unfair advantage which the intensity of her wish might have given her was taken away. On the other side they had this unfair advantage—they could pray, and pray as long as they pleased if that was any good. She had only her strong, persistent, never-suspended wish. Nothing, nothing had she done against him. She had never once thought of assisting or hastening fate.

But now that God had turned everything the wrong way and dashed the cup from her lips, and set Himself against her, now in the frenzy that filled her bosom, the rage, the shame, the rebellion, the wild and overwhelming passion, a new furious light had blazed in upon the boiling waves. Ah, God was great, they said. He could restore life when everything pointed to another conclusion. He could work a miracle—but a

woman could foil Him. She could kill though He made alive. A moment of time, an insignificant action—and all His healing and restoration would come to nothing. Where did it come from—that awful suggestion? How did it arise? In what way was it shaped? From what source did it come—the horrible thought? It came cutting through her mind and all her agitation in a moment as if it had been flung into her soul from outside. It came like a flash of lightning, like an arrow, like a pointed dart that cut into the flesh. It was not there one moment, and the next it was there, dominating all the commotion, penetrating all the fever and the tumult—a master thought.

She drove along the country roads in the corner of her carriage, seeing nothing—through the noonday sunshine and the shade of the trees, through villages and by cornfields where the storing of the harvest had begun—and heard nothing and noticed nothing. At last she pulled the string strongly and told the coachman not to go to Ridding but in the other direction to another little town, to a certain house where she had a call to make. And she made the call; and came out of the house while the coachman was walking his horses up and down, and went into the chief street of the place and made a few purchases, then returned to the house of her friend and got into the brougham and drove home. The coachman had not been aware that she had done anything but come out of the house where she had been calling when he drew up. And he drove home very quickly, having himself come out before his dinner-hour, a thing that did not please him. Letitia was very pale when she came home and tired with her

long drive, but she eat her luncheon and did not again shut herself from her family—nor did she avoid speaking of Mar. She went to look at him after she had rested a little.

"But I see very little difference," she said. "He seems to me just as ill as ever, too weak to move, and scarcely opening his eyes."

"But the fever is gone," they all cried together.

Letitia shook her head. "I hope the doctor was not mistaken," she said. Her words threw a cold chill upon the household after the delight of the morning. But that was all. "Missis was always one to take the worst view of everything," the cook remarked, to whom the undeniable proof of improvement which Mar had shown by swallowing his chicken broth was a proof that needed no confirmation. She sent up a little of the same broth to Mrs. Parke, hearing that she had a headache, and received a message back to the effect that the soup was very good, and that it must be kept always going, always ready, as the young gentleman was able to take it. "But I'll try him with a bit of chicken to-morrow, no more slops," said the cook. Thus, though she shook her head and owned that she was not herself so hopeful as Dr. Barker, Letitia sanctioned more or less the satisfaction of the household, and spent the afternoon in a legitimate way. She was frightfully pale, and complained of a headache, which she partly attributed to fatigue and partly to the sun. Yet she saw one or two people who called, and explained Mar's condition to them: "presumably so much better," she said, "but I fear, I fear the doctor takes too sanguine a view. A week hence, if all is well——

But," she said, "the strain of suspense is terrible, almost worse than anything that is certain." There were people who saw her that day who declared afterwards that they could not understand why it was said of Mrs. Parke that she had no heart. Why, if ever there was a woman who felt deeply, it was Mrs. Parke! The suspense about her poor nephew and his long illness had worn her to a shadow; it had nearly killed her—especially as, poor thing, she was not one who took a cheerful view.

Letitia paid several visits in the evening to the sick-room, or to the ante-room connected with it, after the night nurse had begun her duty. The other attendant was not in sympathy with the mistress of the house: but she stood with the night nurse at the door of the room and peered at Mar, and they mutually shook their heads and gave each other meaning looks. "I wish I could see him with Nurse Robinson's eyes," the attendant said, and Mrs. Parke replied with a sigh that she hoped most earnestly the doctor was not mistaken. "For I see no difference, nurse." "And neither do I, ma'am," said the gloomy woman. She paused for a moment, and then she added in a whisper, "I've no business to interfere, but I can't bear to see you looking so pale. I do wish, Mrs. Parke, that you would go to bed."

"I thought the same of you, nurse," said Mrs. Parke, "indeed I wanted to offer to sit up half the night to let you have a little rest."

"Thank you very much, but I must keep to my post," the woman said.

"Then you must let me give you some of my

cordial," said Mrs. Parke. "I have an old mixture that has been in the family for a long time. You must take a little of it from my hand: it will strengthen you." There was a little argument over this, all whispered at the door of Mar's room, and at last the nurse consented. She was so touched that when Letitia came back carrying the drink, she ventured to give Mrs. Parke a timid kiss, and to say, "Dear lady, I wish you would go to bed yourself and get a good rest. It is almost more trying when one begins to hope, and you are frightfully pale." Letitia took the kiss in very good part (for the nurse was a lady), and promised to go and rest. It was still early, the household not yet settled to the quiet of the night, and John had not come upstairs: so that there was nobody to note Letitia's movements, who went and came through the half-lit corridor in a dark dressing-gown, and with a noiseless foot, stealing from her own room to that of the patient. She had made this little pilgrimage several times, when, listening in the ante-room, she heard at last the heavy regular breathing of the attendant in Mar's room, which proved to her that what she intended had come to pass. Letitia paused for a moment outside the door. She was a little light woman, still slim, even thin, as in her younger days. She moved like a ghost, making no sound; but when she perceived that all was ready for her purpose, there was something that almost betrayed her, and that was the labouring, gasping breath of excitement, which it was all she could do to keep down. Her lungs, her heart, were so strained by the effort to be calm, that her hurried respiration came like the breath of a furnace, hot and interrupted. She stood

holding on to the framework of the door, looking in from the comparative light of the room in which she stood to the shaded room in which Mar lay, with the light falling upon the table by his bedside, where were his drinks and medicines—and faintly upon the white pillow with the dark head sunk upon it, in a ghostly stillness. The nurse sat in an easy chair behind, out of the light, with her head fallen back, wrapped in sleep, breathing regularly and deep.

Letitia stood and watched for a whole long minute, which might have been a year, peering with her white and ghastly face, like a visible spirit of evil. When she had a little subdued the panting of her heart she pushed the door noiselessly, and stole into the room. She kept her eyes upon the sleeping nurse, ready to draw back if she should move; but that was the only interruption Letitia feared. She had left the door open for her own safe retreat. It had not occurred to her that anyone could follow behind her. She went over to the bedside to the table on which the light fell. And there she stood still again for another terrible moment. Did her heart fail her, did any hand of grace hold her back? She might have done what she had to do three times over while she stood there with one hand upon her breast keeping down her panting breath. Then she put her right hand for a moment over the glass with the milk that stood ready, the drink for the sick boy. That was all. It was the affair of a moment. She might have done it in the nurse's presence, and no one would have been the wiser. When she had done it she made a step backward, meaning to pass away as she had come. But instead of moving freely through

the open air she came suddenly against something, some one, who stood behind, and who grasped without a word her clenched right hand. Letitia's labouring heart leaped as if it would have burst out of her breast. There came from her a choked and horrible sound, not a cry, for she durst not cry. She kept her senses, her consciousness by a terrible effort. No! whoever it was, if it was John, her husband, if it was one of her children who had discovered her in this awful moment —whoever it was, she would not fall down there at Mar's bedside like a murderer caught in the act. No! out of the room, at least, out of the scene—somewhere, where they might kill her if they pleased, but not there —not there!

He or she who had seized her from behind stretched a hand over her shoulder and took the milk from the table, and then the two figures in a strange, noiseless, mingling, half struggle, half accord, passed from the darkened room into the light, and looked in a horror, beyond words, into each other's faces. And then all the forces of self-control could no longer restrain the affrighted heart-stricken cry—"Mary!" which came from Letitia's dry lips.

CHAPTER XXII.

In the moment of that movement, half-dragged by the fast and firm hold upon her, half pushing her captor, and notwithstanding the horror and panic of her arrest and discovery, Letitia had time to form in her mind the explanations she would give to John, if it were John: or if it should happen to be Letty (which was impossible—but all things are possible to guilt and mortal terror—) the indignant superiority with which she would send her away. But when she twisted herself round and confronted in the light of the ante-room, which seemed a brilliant illumination after the dark chamber within, the face of Mary! Mary! Letitia's strength collapsed, her self-command abandoned her, the gasping breath came in a hoarse rattle from her throat, her jaw fell, her eyes seemed to turn upon their orbits. She hung by the hand that held her half insensible, helpless, overwhelmed, like a bundle of clothes, as if she had no longer any sensation or impulse of her own. The only thing that kept her from falling was the grip upon her hand, and the support of the arm which Mary had put round her to reach it. She was stunned and stupefied, scarcely alive enough to be afraid, though there began to grow upon her mind by degrees a consciousness that this woman who held her had been mad —which even when she had full command of herself

was what Letitia feared most in all the world. Mary was taller than her prisoner. She seemed taller now than ever she had been in her life, her eyes were shining like stars, her nostrils dilated with excitement and strong feeling, her colour coming and going. She did not speak, but with her other hand held the milk to Letitia's lips, always with her arm supporting her, as one might offer drink to a child. "Drink it," she said at last, "drink it!" in a keen whisper that seemed to cut the silence like a knife. No mercy, no pity were in Mary's eyes. She held Letitia's wrist in a grip of iron, and pressing upon her, forcing her head back, held the glass to her lips, "drink it!—drink it!" The struggle was but a momentary one, and noiseless. They were like two shadows moving, swaying, forming but one in their speechless conflict. Then came the sudden crash of the shattered glass, as Letitia, recovering her forces in her desperation, with a sudden twist of her arm dashed it from her antagonist's hand. The contents were spilled between them, and formed a white pool upon the floor, from which, instinctively, each woman drew back; and then they stood gazing at each other again.

Letitia's every nerve was trembling with terror, physical fear surmounting the first panic of discovery, which was a terror of the mind. She expected every moment an *accès* of madness, in which she might be torn limb from limb — though at the same time calculating that the mad woman might loose her hold, and there might be a possibility of desperate flight, and of all the household on her side protecting her, and sudden relief from every terror. The nature of the

emergency brought back to her after the first speechless horror her power of thought and calculation. She kept her eyes upon Mary's eyes, still wild with fright, but awakened to a vigilant watch and keen attention to every indication of the other's looks. But this was not the Mary whom Letitia had ever seen before. Her face had cleared like a sky after rain. It was like that sky ethereally pale, exalted, with a transparence that seemed to come from some light beyond. Mary was no longer a weak woman distracted by over tenderness, by visionary compunctions, humbleness, uncertainty—but clear and strong, with the quivering, expanding nostrils, the wide open eyes and trembling lips of inspiration. She held her captive still, though she stood a little apart from her, grasping fast in her own Letitia's shut hand.

"What did you put in it," she said, "to kill my boy?"

"Mary!" Letitia panted. "Why do you try to frighten me?—your boy?—you have told me you had no boy——"

"Whom you tried to kill—before he was born; whom you drove out of my knowledge—for I was mad. I know it all now—and you did it; what did you put in that to kill my boy?"

There came a shriek from Letitia's labouring breast. The words maddened her again into frantic terror. She made a wild effort to free her hand. Though it was a shriek, and intense as the loudest outcry, it was subdued by the other terror of being heard and discovered. Between the two she hung suspended, not able altogether to coerce nature, but still keeping its expression under.

"Mary," she cried, "let me go—let me go!"

"What was it you put in it to kill him?"

"Mary! Let me go—let me go!"

"Not till you tell me; and then you shall go—where you will; away from here—away from my boy."

They were women not used to any such struggle, and feeling in the depths of their hearts that to struggle so for any reason was a shame to them; and every moment as it passed brought this consciousness more near to Mary, who in the first shock was capable of anything. Perhaps her hold loosened, perhaps Letitia felt the magnetic effect of that relaxation even before it was palpable. All at once she flung out her arm which Mary held, and threw something which was in it into the dull small fire which smouldered in the grate, and which was kept there, notwithstanding the warmth of the July nights, for the uses of the sick-room. There was a faint clang of glass against the bars, and then the two figures separated altogether and stood apart, still gazing at each other with panting breath.

Letitia had felt that if she ever got free from the grasp that held her—if ever she could throw off the hand that was like velvet yet closed on her like iron, there was but one thing to do, to fly, to get help, to make everybody understand that Lady Frogmore, mad as she had once been before, had burst in on her and tried to kill her. But now that she had freed herself she did not take to flight as she intended. She drew away a step nearer the door, that she might retain that alternative—and kept the most watchful eye upon her antagonist, ready in a moment to fly. But she did not do so. Her breath began to come more easily. Per-

haps she was relieved that the attempt had failed—which at once relaxed the tragic tension of her nerves; at all events her heart gave a leap of satisfaction that there was no proof against her. The milk spilt on the floor had soaked into the carpet—the vial was fused into liquid metal, which could betray no one, in the fire. She had gone through a terrible moment but it was over. She fell back upon the wall and supported herself against it, propping up the shoulders which still heaved with the storm that was passed—and then she said in something like her usual voice—

"What is this all about, Lady Frogmore?"

Mary had come to herself like Letitia. The first impulse of passion and excitement failed in her, it was so unusual to her gentle bosom. She looked at this woman who stood defiant, staring at her, with a look of wonder and doubt. "If I have done you any wrong—" she began with a quaver in her voice; and then paused. "You know," she began again, "that I have not done you wrong. You stole into the room in the dark, you put something in his drink. Oh," cried Mary, clasping her hands, "if I had not come at that moment, if God had not sent me, my boy might have been murdered. How dare you stand and face me there? Go, go!" She stamped her foot upon the floor. "Go! Don't come near my child again."

"Your child," Letitia said, with a smile of scorn. "You who never had one! You have said so a hundred times."

Mary's lips opened as if to reply—then she paused. "Who am I to be angry!" she said. "I have given her cause to speak. Oh, go," she cried, "go. I will not

accuse you. You know what you have done, and I know, and that will separate us for ever and ever. No one, no one shall come near my child to harm him again, for his mother will be there. Go, you wicked woman, go."

"You are mad," cried Letitia, "who would believe a mad woman? Say what you please, do you think anyone will listen to you! You are mad, mad! I'll have you put in an asylum. I'll have you shut up. I'll— Oh, save me from her, she's mad, she's mad!" cried Letitia, with a shriek. There was someone coming —and Mary had put forth her hands as if to seize her again. Letitia ran past her to the door, and there stood for a moment panting, vindictive. "Do you think they will leave him with a mad woman?" she cried, then gave another shriek and fled; for it was not John as she thought who was coming to protect her but another cloaked figure like a repetition of Mary's, who appeared on the other side. She did not stop for further parley, but ran wildly, with the precipitation of terror, into the long, silent, dim corridor.

"What has happened? What is it?" said Agnes, terrified, going up to her sister who stood with clasped hands in the middle of the room, the light falling upon her face. Mary put her arms round her, giving her a close momentary embrace, which was half joy to see some one come who would stand by her, and half an instinctive motion to support herself and derive strength from her sister's touch.

"I came in time," she said. "I saved him. He is safe. I will never leave my child again. Oh, never while she is here——"

"What is it? What is it, Mary?"

Mary told her story, leaning upon her sister, holding her fast, whispering in her ear. Even Letitia's cries and vituperations had been subdued, whispers of passion and desperation, no more. But to Agnes it seemed an incredible table, a vision of the still confused and wandering brain. She soothed Mary, patting her shoulder with a trembling hand, saying, "No, no. You must have dreamt it. No, no, my dear: oh, that was not the danger," in a troubled voice. Mary detached herself from her sister, putting Agnes away gently, but with decision. She took off the bonnet which she had worn all this time, and tied the veil which had dropped from it over her head. Then she went into the inner room without a word. To pass into that silent and darkened room out of the agitation of the other was like going into another world. The breathing of the nurse in her deep sleep filled it with a faint regular sound. The patient did not stir. Mary sat down at the foot of the bed like a shadow. Her figure in its dark dress seemed to be absorbed in the dimness and pass out of sight altogether. Agnes stood at the door and looked into the chamber full of sleep and silence, weighed down by the mystery about her. Had that fantastic, horrible scene really happened, or had it been but a dream? There were still traces on the carpet of something white that had soaked into it, and her foot had crushed a portion of the broken glass upon the floor. Was it true? Was it possible it could be true? She stood wondering on the verge of the stillness that closed over the sick-room in which her sister had disappeared. It is strange at any time to look into a chamber thus occupied. The

feeble patient in the bed noiseless in the slumber of weakness, the watcher by his side invisible in the gloom, a point of wakeful, anxious life among those shadows. The nurse sleeping heavily in the background, invisible, added another aching circumstance to the mystery—nurses of that class do not sleep so. Was it true? Could it be true?

She was called back to the common passage of affairs by a faint knock at the door of the ante-room, and going to it found Martin, conducted by a sleepy maid who had been roused to prepare Lady Frogmore's room. "Where is my lady, Miss Hill?" said the anxious Martin. "I can't find my lady. It's late and she's tired, and I must get her to bed."

"No, Martin; she will not leave her son to-night."

"Oh, Miss Hill, her son! She will die of it, or she will go wrong again, and what will everybody say to me for allowing this? She must come to bed. She must come to bed!"

"No one can make her do so, Martin—the nurse has gone to sleep, someone is wanted here. I will stay by her, and if I can get her to go to bed I will."

"You will both kill yourselves," cried Martin aggrieved, "and what will be the advantage in that? You may, if you please, Miss Hill, I have no authority; but my lady, my lady! It is as much as her life is worth."

Agnes bade the maid bring her some shawls, and lie down herself. She went softly into the sick-room and put a wrap round Mary's shoulders, who raised her pale face, just visible through the dark in its whiteness, to kiss her in token of thanks. Agnes permitted her

hungry heart an anxious look at the patient and satisfied herself, to the relief of various awful doubts that had been growing on her that he breathed softly and regularly, though almost inaudibly. She endeavoured in vain to rouse the sleeping woman behind, and then she herself retired into the ante-room. Was it true? Could it be possible? As she sat there, realizing the extraordinary way in which Mary and she had been allowed to come in and take possession—when she perceived that no one came near them, that Letitia did not return, did not even send a servant, but gave up the patient and the charge of him without a word, without the slightest notice of their possible wants, or care for them, a sense of the strangeness of it all grew upon her. Could Mary's tale be true? Oh, God, could it be true? The woman sleeping so deeply, not to be roused—the house fallen into complete silence as if everyone had gone to bed. Mary and she, as it seemed, the only two waking in all the place. Could it be true? Could it be true?

An hour or two later the scene had changed, the sick-room was faintly illuminated through the closed curtains with the light of the morning. And Agnes, looking in, through the half open doorway, met Mary's look, her face like the clear, pale morning, a sort of ecstasy in her wakeful eyes. She did not seem to have moved since Agnes threw the shawl round her, nor had she closed those widely-opened eyes. When she had given her sister that look they returned to the bed where Mar's young wasted countenance was now dimly visible. There was almost a chill in that blue dawning of the new day; a something clear and keen above

illusion, the light of reality, yet the light of a vision. As Agnes looked, everything returned to its immovable stillness again. The pale boy sleeping, the pale mother watching, the nurse behind come into sight with her head thrown back, a potent witness in her insensibility. Was it true? Could it be true?

CHAPTER XXIII.

JOHN PARKE woke next morning to see his wife in her dressing gown, moving vaguely about the room, a shadow against the full summer light that came in at all the windows. He could not make out at first what she was doing, prowling about in a curious monotonous round from window to window, pausing to look out, as it seemed, at the edge of the blind, first of one, then of another. He watched her for a little while in vague alarm. During all this time a vague but painful suspicion was in John's mind. He knew better than anyone how she had looked forward to a new state of affairs. Had she not drawn even him to that vile anticipation, to plan and calculate upon the boy's death? The pain of the thought that he had done so made more intense his sense of the terrible revulsion in her mind when all these horrible hopes came to an end. He was not a man who naturally divined what was going on in the minds of others, but the movement in his own, on this occasion, and the instinctive knowledge which long years of companionship had vaguely, magnetically conveyed to him about his wife—not a matter of reflection

or reason, but simply of impression—kept a dull light about Letitia which surrounded no other person upon earth. Something like sympathy mingled with and increased his power of comprehending during this dreadful crisis. How would she make up her mind to it, he asked himself, notwithstanding the horror and shame with which he thought of the calculations he himself had been seduced into sharing. He knew very well how little she liked to be foiled, how she struggled against disappointment, and got her will in defiance of every combination of circumstances. During all the previous day he had been very uneasy, certain that in her long absence she was planning something, wondering what she could plan that would have any effect upon the present state of affairs—fearing—he knew not what. John could not allow himself to think that his wife would contemplate harming the boy. Oh, no, no! such a thought was not in his mind. Letitia had her faults. She had never been kind to Mar. She had thought of him as an interloper, as an intruder, as supplanting Duke—and she had not concealed her feeling. But harm him—by so much as a touch. Oh, no! no! Nevertheless, John had been very uneasy all day, and even in his sleep this gnawing discomfort had not left him. He had dreamed of deathbeds and dying persons, and of strange scenes of chaos in which she was always present, though he knew not for what purpose. And when he woke suddenly and saw her wandering about the room in the high clear morning light like a ghost, all the uneasiness of the previous day, all the troubled dreams of the night came back upon his heart. He watched her for a minute without making any sign, and

then he called "Letitia!" His voice made her start violently—but she came towards him at once, wrapping her dressing-gown round her as though she felt cold.

"Isn't it very early? Why are you prowling about at this hour?"

"Yes, I suppose it's early. I couldn't sleep—one cannot always sleep when one would."

"You are not such a bad sleeper as you think," said John—as have said before him, in the calm of experience, the partners of many a restless wife and husband. "And I wish," he added impatiently, "that you'd let me sleep, at least."

Instead of quenching him by a sharp word, as was Letitia's wont, she came towards the bedside and sat down, turning her back to the light. "John," she said, "there has been a great deal happening while you have been asleep."

"What?" he cried. He raised himself up on his elbow, terrified, threatening. "Letitia, for God's sake, don't tell me that anything has happened to the boy."

"Oh, the boy!" she cried, with an impatience that was balm to his heart. Then she went on, not looking at him, "Fancy, who arrived last night—Mary, looking for her child——"

"Lady Frogmore!"

"Mary—and calling for her child—she who always denied that she ever had one. She came flying upon me in his room, and seized hold of me and dragged me out of it; mad—mad—as mad again—as—as a March hare." Her lips parted in a harsh laugh. "I believe she would have torn me to pieces if I had not

taken to my heels. You know there is nothing in the world I am so frightened of as madness—nothing! I took to my heels——"

"Wait a bit," said John, "wait, I don't understand. She came in the middle of the night to see her child?"

"Agnes must have put her up to it. Agnes must have got it into her head at last that she had a child."

"And you were in his room? What were you doing in his room, Letitia? You have never nursed him. You were asleep when I came upstairs."

She gave him a momentary glance—half of defiance, half of alarm—and yet she had thought of this, too. "I fancied the nurse looked sleepy—the night nurse, you know, John—I thought she looked drowsy, and I stole back to listen. Well I did, for she was asleep. I went in to see that all was right for the night—his drink——"

Even Letitia's nerve was not enough for this. She shivered. "It is cold at this hour in the morning," she said, her teeth chattering.

"Did you give him anything to drink?" John would not have dared to confess to himself what dread apprehension went through his heart. And it was dreadful for him to talk of it, though she was so wonderful in self-command.

"I?—oh, no. I gave him nothing. I have not nursed him, you know. I saw that all was there that he could want, and was going to rouse the nurse, when somebody came upon me and took me by the shoulders. At first I thought it was you."

"Why should you think that I would take you by

the shoulders?" His suspicion was not quenched, but seized upon every word.

"Yes," she said, "why should I? I thought, perhaps, you were angry with me for being there at all."

"Why should I be angry with you," he asked again, "for being there?" never taking his eyes from her face.

On her part she never looked towards him, but continued impatiently, "I don't suppose I thought of the whys and the wherefores. I thought it was you, that was all. And when I found it was Mary—I don't know whether she dragged me out or I pushed her out. Above all I feared a noise to wake the boy."

John gave her a long searching look. He did not want to find her out. He wanted her to clear herself from all suspicions, from all doubt. "Ah, the boy!" he said, with a long-drawn breath, "the poor boy! Did you wake him? It might have been as much as his life was worth."

"You think of nothing else," she said. Then with a sort of indulgence to his weakness, "The boy—never stirred." She breathed forth heavily a sigh—was it of thankfulness?

"I suppose he was sleeping," she added, with a sort of bravado, "I did not look."

"Good God!" cried John, springing up, "was there any doubt? Had you any doubt?" He seized his dressing-gown and thrust his arms into the sleeves, and his feet into slippers.

"Aye," cried Letitia, still without a movement, without even looking at him, "go and see. Nothing would make me face that woman again."

She sat idly playing with a ring upon her finger, turning it round and round, but neither raised her head nor looked at him, though he paused before her with again the searching look of anxiety which he dared not define.

"Letitia," he said, "for God's sake what do you mean? There is something in all this I don't understand."

"Ah, don't I speak plain enough?" she said. "It's Mary come back, and as mad as a March hare."

"And you left her—a woman—in that state—alone with the boy, just out of the jaws of death? What's that on your gown?"

She looked at it, bending forward to see—a long streak as of something spilt. The stain was stiff, giving a rigid line to the stuff—and what John suspected, feared it to be, cannot be put into words. His eyes grew wild with terror, and his voice hoarse, as he repeated:—

"On your gown? What is it? What is it?"

"Oh, the milk!" Letitia said. It brought everything before her, and a shiver ran over her again; but also a laugh, which, though tuneless enough, gave the distracted man by her side some comfort, for she could not have laughed surely if it had been—— "We spilt it between us," Letitia said, "and mad as she was she drew back for that, not to spoil her dress. She had her senses enough for that."

He stood in front of her for a moment, undecided what to do, when she suddenly raised her head and cried sharply, "John, why don't you go and see?"

"I can't understand you," he said. "You mean more than I know."

She looked up at him again and laughed in a way that froze his blood. "Don't I always?" she said, with a tone of contempt. Then added, stamping on the floor "Go—go and see what has happened. I will never see that woman again."

John went softly along the corridor, half dressed, ashamed, miserable. Something had happened more than he could understand, perhaps more than he would ever understand. The house was all silent, wrapt as in a garment in the morning sunshine, which came in by the great staircase windows and flooded everything. It was still very early. His step made a sound which ran all through and through it. He could not be noiseless as the women were, who stole about, and met, and had their encounters, and nobody was ever the wiser. He thought it was in the middle of the night that this arrival must have occurred which seemed to him like a dream, and which as he passed through the sleeping house and felt the stillness of it he began to think must be but some wild fancy of his wife's, something which could not be true. When he pushed open the door of the ante-room a dark figure rose hurriedly out of a chair, and met him with the dazed look of a person disturbed and half asleep. "Miss Hill!" he cried. Then it was true!

She put up her hand and said "Hush." Then, after a moment, "He is asleep, like a baby; he has never stirred."

"Are you sure—that he is asleep?"

"Oh, I thought that myself," she cried, understanding him. "He was so quiet. Yes, yes, he is asleep;

breathing faintly, but you can hear him. Oh, safe a sound asleep!"

"My wife told me—his mother——"

"She is there," said Agnes, beckoning him to th door of the inner room. He stood and looked in fo a moment, with his clouded and troubled face, leaning against the lintel. Mary's ear had been caught by the sound. She looked up and met his eyes with that ethereal clearness of countenance, the exaltation of her aroused and awakened soul. She looked him in the face with a mild serenity and peace and smiled in recognition, then turned her eyes to the bed as if to show him the boy softly sleeping there. Behind, the nurse still slept in the easy chair. To John it seemed as if it were all a dream, of which there was no explanation. How did it come about that the sick-room had passed into the keeping of these two, arriving mysteriously during the night, whom his wife must have risen from his side to receive, of whom he had heard nothing? The nurse asleep, all the usual faces gone, the mother who had disowned him sitting in that attitude of love by Mar's side—what did it all mean?

"This is all very strange," he said, drawing back from the door. "I find you here in possession whom I thought far away—and the mother who was so estranged. Did you come down from the skies? Is it safe to leave her there? Is she——"

Agnes looked at the man who was comparatively little known to her, who was a man, frightening and disturbing in his strange undress in the midst of the silent house. She was an elderly single woman, unaccustomed to give any account of herself to strange men,

and her weariness and all the unusual circumstances told upon her. Her lips quivered and her eyes filled. "Oh," she said, "Mr. Parke, do not think we meant any—any reproach. Things have happened that have brought my sister to her full senses—and to remember everything. I could not keep her from her boy—you would not keep her from her boy——"

"Not if she is sane; not if it is safe," said John. He looked in again through the half closed door. Once more Mary's keen ear caught the sound; and again she turned towards him her face, which was like the morning sky. She had never been beautiful in her best and youngest days. Now with her grey hair ruffled by the night's vigil, her mild eyes cleared from any film that had been upon them, lambent and inspired with watchful love, her look overawed the anxious spectator. He stepped back again with a sort of apologetic humility. "I don't understand it," he said. "You seem to have some meaning among you that I don't know: but I cannot be the one to disturb her. I hope—I hope that I am making no mistake——"

"You are making no mistake, Mr. Parke," said Agnes. "Mar was my child more than hers; he was my baby. My heart was nearly broken, for I thought he was dying when I came here last night. But I trust him in his mother's hands. I give place to her because it is her right. Do you think I would leave my boy to her if she were not in her full senses, ready to defend him, ready to protect him——?"

She stopped, choked with the sobs, which, in her great exhaustion and emotion, Agnes could no longer entirely keep down.

"To defend him—to protect him? From what? from what?" John said.

"Oh, how can I tell? From the perils and dangers of the night; from carelessness and any ill wish."

John's voice was choked as that of Agnes' had been. "There is no ill wish," he said—"none—to Mar in this house."

He saw, as he spoke, the traces on the floor of something spilt like that on his wife's gown—and some fragments of the broken glass which had escaped Agnes' scrutiny. He did not know what they meant. He was not clever, nor had he any imagination to divine; but something went through him like a cold blast, chilling him to the heart. He paused a moment, staring at the floor, and the words died away on his lips.

When John returned to his wife's room Letitia was in bed, and to all appearance fast asleep. The poor man was glad, if such a word could be applied to anything he was capable of feeling. He withdrew softly into his dressing-room, and sat there for a long time with his head in his hands and his face hidden. What to think of the mysterious things that had passed that night he did not know.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE sun was very bright on that July morning. When should it be bright if not in the crown of summer? It triumphed over all the vain attempts of curtains drawn and shutters closed to keep it out, and streamed in in rays doubly intense for these precautions, at every crevice. One of these resplendent rays fell upon the dress of the watcher who sat by Mar's bedside. When he opened his eyes first this was what caught them. The dress was not the black dress and white apron of the nurse. It was grey, of a soft silvery tone, with a pattern woven in the silk, and a satin sheen which caught the light. Mar in the dreamy state of his weakness admired it like a child. How soft the colour was, and the raised flowers which shone almost white in that wonderful ray of sunshine. His pleasure in it suited the dreamy state of feeble well-being in which he lay gradually getting awake. It seemed a kindness to put that pretty thing before him instead of the glare of the white apron on the gloom of the black gown. What was it, though, so near his bed?

He raised himself and beheld the most astonishing sight. Not the nurse at all with whose aspect he was so familiar, but a lady. Her face was shrouded by her hand, and for a moment he did not recognize her. A lady in those soft, beautiful robes, in an unfamiliar

pose; not easy like the accustomed nurse, who was so kind but not anxious. This figure leaned forward looking at him, intent upon him, though he could not at first make out her face. Then he perceived the grey hair curling over the hand which supported her head, and then— He gave a little cry, "Ah!" which made her rise and come close to him. "Ah!" he said in his surprise; and then, with a curious, long drawn breath, "Am I dead?"

"Oh no, no."

"I know: not dead, for I'm living and talking, but I must have died, I suppose? And—and you too?"

She came up, closer and closer, and took his hand, and began to cry, clasping it within her own. "Why should that be? Why should that be?" she said.

"Because," said Mar, groping with his faint, half awakened senses and intelligence still in the strangest maze, "because—you are here."

"Do you know me?"

He did not answer, but in those large, humid eyes of weakness the answer was so plain. Know you! they seemed to say; what do I know but you? Mary dropped upon her knees by the bedside, and began to kiss his hand over and over. "I am your mother," she said, and went on repeating those words as if they were something which he would not believe. "I am your mother—I am your mother." They were a wonder to her, but no wonder to Mar. He smiled with the heavenly light in his eyes which belong to all, more or less, who have come back from the gates of death; and specially to the children when they are so good, so good, as to come back. Was there ever any mother

but was thankful, oh, beyond telling, to her child for coming back? He looked at her with that angelic superiority of the newly returned, saying nothing. What could he say? He had known it all his life, but had never said a word. He had thought of her, dreamed of her, longed for her, but never had said a word. Had he died it would have been without a sign of that paramount dream and longing. He had never had any sense of wrong, only of wistful wishes and a lingering, never-quenched, always visionary hope. When Mar had made up his mind, as he had done very early, many years before, that he would die, he had felt a consolation in his childish mind from the thought. God would surely let him attend upon her, be her guardian angel, though he was so little. And then when she should die too—ah then! she would not fail to know him. It was this old childish thought so long cherished that made him think he must have died when he saw his mother for the first time by his bedside. But he was shy to utter that sacred word. He had dreamt of it so much, breathing it to himself like a melody which he alone had the secret of, that the thought of saying it aloud filled him with a strange trouble. And that she should kiss his hand, she! whose hem of her dress he would have been glad to kiss, troubled him; but to ask her to kiss him and not his hand, was something too bold, too hazardous to think of. He could only look at her, as he might have looked, at the moment he had so often thought of, when he took her hand to lead her out of life, her guardian angel, and she recognized him in the light of heaven.

"I am your mother," she kept saying. "Do you

know me, do you know me?" laying her cheek u
his hand, kissing every wasted finger. Mary did
wait for any answer, perhaps she did not want it.
was enough for her to make her statement clear to
to show him who she was. She had no fear of
affection, nor any compunction as if for guilt of
own towards him. None of these things troubled
mind. She was as if she had come home from a
absence, which by the most innocent natural causes
kept her separate from her boy. This was the wa
which it seemed to affect her. She was not aware
she had been in fault or required forgiveness—or
there was any special harm or misfortune in it.
had arrived in time. That was the conviction warm
her heart. She had come in time. Her boy had b
in danger, and she had arrived in time to save h
Had there been any sense in her mind of guilt tow
him it would all have been driven away by this ha
thought. She had been not a moment too late, exa
in time. Had she arrived earlier she might never h
known the risk he ran, or the supreme need there
of her presence to protect him—and had she arri
later he might have been lost. She came by the p
vidence of God exactly in time.

Agnes outside heard the murmur of the voices,
fearing she knew not what, that her sister might
too much and disturb the equilibrium of the patient
so important a moment, came stealing into the room
prevent any overstrain of emotion. Poor Agnes h
been the only mother Mar had ever known. All t
he knew of maternal love and tenderness was from h
and he was to her the most cherished thing in

world, the apple of her eye. But when she came in thus upon the pair she was not welcome to either. She was a disturbing influence, a third party. They did not want her. This is so often the fate of the third that she was not surprised, but it cannot be said that she liked it. It requires a quite celestial knowledge of the heart and charity for all its waywardness to enable one to see one's self set aside and another preferred who has not done half so much to deserve that preference. Mar indeed hailed her more openly than he had done his mother, holding out his disengaged hand to her, drawing her nearer; but it was more as witness of his blessedness than as the cause of any part of it. And Mary got up from her knees as her sister came in, as if now the intimate things of the heart must be put away, and the ordinary ones attended to. She bent over the bed and kissed his cheek, and then she returned to the cares of the nursing, which all this time had been laid aside.

"The question now is what we should give him," said Mary. "He must want something. It would have been wrong to disturb him in that beautiful sleep, but now that he is awake he must have something. What shall we do? Go down and forage for him, or wake this poor woman, who will be ready to kill herself——"

"I cannot be sorry for her," said Agnes, "to sleep all through the night when she could not know how much she might be wanted."

"It is not her fault; and it will be dreadful for her when she knows. Do you think his eyes will bear a little more light? Do you feel the light upon your eyes, my dear boy? Open that window there where it will

shine upon him—Ah," Mary cried, turning round
the nurse, who began to move and stir. Mar fel
shy when his mother's eyes were not upon him.
was able to take a little timid initiative of his own
put his two thin hands upon hers, which was s
and white and round. How soft it was to tou
hand like velvet, no, a hand much softer than
vulgar image—like a mother's hand, and no less;
drawing it towards him by degrees, shyly, yet wi
creasing boldness, got it to his pillow and laid his
upon it, holding it there as sometimes an i
will do. Mary withdrew her eyes from the w
who was slowly coming to herself. She looked a
boy, pillowing his head upon her hand with th
fantile movement, and a tender delight filled her
With her disengaged hand she pulled her sister's s
and attracted her attention. Mar gave them b
look of blessedness in his ecstasy of weakness and
faction, and then closed his eyes and lay as if he
his cheek upon that softest of pillows, and happine
his heart. Agnes stood by and looked on, the
maid, the grim old spinster (as young men had
known to call her) with a pang which was almos
supportable, made up of pain and of pleasure.
more than pleasure and more than pain—the bli
heaven to see them thus restored to each other, an
the claims of nature set right, and yet, for she was
human, a sharp stab like a knife to see how lit
part she herself had in it. She who alone had
Mar's mother, who had worshipped the boy and
nothing to him. This keen cut forced a tear into
corner of each eye, which it filled, and through w

she saw everything, a medium which enlarged and softened, yet somewhat blurred the picture which was so full of consolation.

At this moment the nurse sprang to her feet with a cry. She said, "Where am I? What has happened?" and then, with a wild outcry subdued but shrill with misery, added, "I have been asleep. Oh, God forgive me, I have been asleep."

"There is no harm done," said Agnes coldly, advancing a step and almost glad there was some one she could be harsh to, without wrong, "his mother has been with him all the night."

"Oh, God forgive me," said the nurse. "Oh, what will become of me—I have slept all through the night!"

"It is very true," said Mary, with her voice which was soft with great happiness, "but I don't think it is your fault. Say nothing, and we will say nothing. I have been here in your place."

"Bestir yourself, now," said Agnes, "and tell us what he ought to have."

"Oh, ladies," said the unfortunate, "I never did such a thing before—never—never! You may not believe me, but it is true, and if he is the worse for it, oh, goodness, it will kill me! What shall I do? What shall I do?" She came forward to the bedside wringing her hands. Her mob cab had been pushed to one side in her sleep—an air of dissipation, of having been up all night, such as never comes to the dutiful watcher, was in her whole appearance. Tears were dropping upon her white apron, making long streaks where they fell with a splash like rain. Mar, with his cheek pil-

lowed on his mother's hand, opened his eyes and looked at her. And there came into the too large, too lustrous eyes of the sick boy, a light that had not been in them for long, that had been rare in them at any time—the light of laughter. It was almost cruel that he should be aroused, but he was so. He raised his head a little and laughed. "She looks so funny," he said, under his breath. It was very good for Mar to be brought down from the superlative in this casual way by a laugh.

"Bless the boy," said Mary; "do you hear him laugh? And bless you for making him laugh, you poor soul. He is none the worse; he has slept all the time. But make haste now, and tell us what has to be done to him: what is he to take? She is dazed still; she has not got back her senses."

"Where is the milk? Was there no milk for him? I am sure," cried the nurse, "I put it here last night."

Mary looked at Agnes; and Agnes, with a terrified glance, at her. Was it true?

"Go," said Miss Hill quietly; "don't waste a moment now, and get him some fresh. Let nobody touch it. I will go with you myself," she cried, after a moment, taking the woman by the arm. Was it true? Was it true?

"Oh," said the nurse, "don't think I'm like that. It never happened before—oh, never, never! No case of mine was ever neglected. Oh, ask the sisters at the hospital. Ask the doctors! I could die with shame—I, that always bragged that I was never sleepy. And why should I be sleepy, after getting my good rest?"

"How do you account for it?" said Agnes, still stern.

They were going down the great staircase together in the full flush of morning light.

"I don't know how to account for it. Mrs. Parke brought me something which she said was restoring, in case I had a hard night. I never have taken anything, but she seemed so kind, and, perhaps, she didn't know. I thought I oughtn't to take it, but she seemed so kind. Oh, madam, don't think badly of me. I'll go back to the hospital to-day and send another. Nurse Newman or Nurse Sandown, or any of them that I looked down upon would be better than me."

Agnes bade her dry her eyes and put her cap straight. "There is no harm done, and nothing shall be said. But you must learn a lesson from what has happened." Her own voice sounded harsh and unfeeling to Agnes as she spoke. She would have liked to be angry, to pour out some of the pain in her heart in indignation and reproach. Could it be true, then? No dream of Mary's, but dreadful truth. She went down with the wondering woman all the way to the dairy, where a pail of foaming milk had just been brought in, and took some of it herself back to the sick-room. So far as this went they were safe, but for all the rest what was to be done? Agnes went a great deal further than Mary in her panic and horror! Could they venture to give him anything, even a glass of water, in a house where such a thing had been done? if, indeed, it was true and not a dream.

"We must get him out of the house," she said. "We must take him home. I brought this myself from the dairy where it had been brought straight from the cow.

I drank some to test it. We must get him away. We must take him home."

"But he is not able to go. It will be many a day yet before he can even leave his bed."

"Then God be praised!" cried Agnes in her excitement. "I can cook. We could both do that in the old days. Everything he takes must be prepared here. We will take him into our own hands."

Mary grew pale with the contagion of her sister's excitement. "Do you think," she said in a terrified whisper, "that she will try such a dreadful thing again?"

"Those who do it once may do it a hundred times," said Agnes, with the solemnity of a popular belief. "I feel as if I were living in an enemy's camp; but you and I will save the boy."

CHAPTER XXV.

WHEN Letty came stealing into the ante-room as soon as she was up, which was between seven and eight in the morning, she was received by Miss Hill with a stern countenance, to the double surprise of the anxious girl, who did not know she was in the house, nor that the kind Aunt Agnes, in whom she had claimed a share for years, could look forbidding.

"Oh, you are here!" Letty said, with a little shriek of pleasure. "He will get all right now you are here."

"Why should he get well now I am here?" cried Agnes, with a gloom of suspicion which Letty did not understand. "Was there anything wrong?"

The girl echoed the "wrong!" with a wondering face. "The nurses were very, very kind," she said, "but one wants to have somebody one is fond of. They would not let me be here."

"Are you fond of him?"

"I——oh," said Letty, with a flush of generous feeling, "how can you ask me that? Fond of Mar? Duke and I, and Tiny would die for Mar—if that would do him any good."

"I think you are true," said Agnes, meditatively; "you're too young to be in any plot. Then you can help me, Letty. You must have everything brought up here—the meat for his beef tea, even the water, fresh drawn. You must see to it yourself. I am going to prepare everything for him myself here."

Letty promised with enthusiasm. She was so anxious to do something that the commission delighted her for the first moment. Then she began to reflect involuntarily. "But why? Oh, I'm afraid cook will be dreadfully offended. She thinks so much of her beef tea. Doesn't he like it? Did nurse say anything——"

"I wish to prepare everything here," said Agnes, in the stern tone which was so new to her: and Letty, much troubled and cast down, stole away. She was hardly gone when the other nurse appeared, fresh and neat, from her night's sleep. "Have you had a good night?" she said; "and how is——" She started and drew back at the sight of the stranger. "Has anything happened?" she said.

"Only that his mother is with the patient, and I am his aunt. We will take charge of him in future," said

Agnes, stiffly. There were aspects in which she was a grim old spinster, as the young men said.

The nurse stared, the cheerful nurse, who had always hoped, always believed in the boy's recovery. Agnes knew no difference between the woman who had slept all the night, and this bright daylight creature who had served him like a sister. She had been busy collecting what things she should want, preparing for the charge she had taken upon her when the nurse entered the room, and now went on with these preparations calmly, putting coals upon the fire and collecting the glasses and dishes which had been used to be carried away.

"You are making a large fire for such a warm day," said the nurse in her astonishment.

"I shall want it, said Agnes curtly.

"Let me do that, it is my business—and there is no hurry. I must first see my patient——"

"Nurse, I mean no discourtesy to you—but he is our patient now. His mother and I have taken the nursing into our own hands."

The nurse stared in consternation. "Does Mrs. Parke know?" she asked, helpless in the extremity of her surprise.

"Mrs. Parke has little to do with it. His mother, Lady Frogmore, is with him, and I am here to help her. We wish to do everything ourselves."

"But——?" gasped the nurse. She added after a moment, "You are dissatisfied with the nursing?"

It was a struggle with Agnes not to bring forward the failure of the other nurse; but she was honourable and just, and shut her mouth close lest she should be-

tray her. "I cannot say that," she said, "for we have not been here. It is only natural that his mother——; and then I prefer to prepare everything for him myself."

"To prepare everything! You must think, then, there is some reason—— Oh, here is Mr. Parke!"

That was a wonder, too; for John Parke was not an early man. And he was very pale, and looked as if he too had been up all night. As a matter of fact it was so many hours since he had been there before in the glow of the summer night which was morning, yet too early for anyone to be astir, that it seemed to him as to Agnes as if the day were already far spent. He came in looking as he had done when their anxiety was the deepest, with a cloud upon his face, and his hands deep in his pockets. "You will take your orders from Miss Hill, nurse," he said, "and Lady Frogmore. It is natural that his mother—: and my wife will not, I think, came downstairs to-day. She is asleep now, but she has had a bad night."

"I am afraid, sir," said the nurse, "Mrs. Parke has been doing too much."

John Parke gave Agnes a troubled, alarmed, inquiring look, yet with a menace in his eyes as if to silence her. "Probably it's that," he said. And then, presently, after a pause, "It couldn't be the fever. It's not contagious? At least, that's what you people say."

"It's not contagious; but several attacks sometimes come on in one house. May I go and see Mrs. Parke?"

"We'll wait a little," said John: "we'll wait till the doctor comes. She is a little confused in her head." He fixed his eyes upon Agnes with a great deal of

meaning. "I scarcely think she knew what she was doing—last night."

These were words that seemed so charged with meaning as to affect the air differently from other words. There seemed a little thrill in the atmosphere when they were said. And the pause that came after them was not like other pauses. There was a vibration in it of mystery and terror. And yet there was not one of the little group who quite understood what it meant. Agnes was in all the excitement of an incident which she was not at all sure was true, while John had nothing but a horrible doubt in his mind, and did not know what it was he feared. And the nurse knew nothing at all, but yet divined something perhaps more terrible than reality, if there was any reality at all. What was the mistress of the house doing last night, for which her husband gloomily said that she was not responsible? But this no one dared to say.

Mary came out at this moment from the inner room. There was nothing in her of either horror or mystery. Her grey hair was a little disordered, curling in stray locks over the black veil which she had tied upon her head; her complexion quite fresh, with its soft rose-tint unaffected by the night's vigil; and her eyes full of light. Lady Frogmore had always possessed pretty eyes, they were the chief beauty of her face; not very bright, but always softly shining and luminous. For many years there had been, save on remarkable occasions, a sort of veil over them, a look as if they were turned inward. Now they were fully aglow, lit like two stars with a lambent quivering light. A look of supreme satisfaction and content was upon her face.

"He has taken his drink," she said, "and gone to sleep again, like a baby. He will probably now have a long sleep. Sleep is better for him than anything. John, we invaded your house like a couple of thieves, after dark. I had not time to ask for you or anything. I came upstairs at once, knowing I was wanted, and arrived here—just in time.

"What do you mean by arriving just in time?" said John Parke, with an awful shadow coming over his face.

"I mean," said Mary with a soft little laugh, "neither too early nor too late—just when I was wanted; and if you ask me how I knew that I was wanted I could not tell you. These things are mysterious. I came just at the moment—"

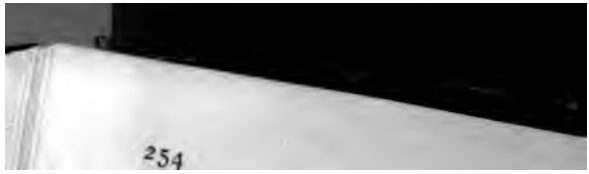
What moment? There was a curdling in the blood of the spectators but none in Mary. All the horror had died away; she could think of nothing but the opportuneness of her own arrrival. Perhaps she had forgotten even what it was which she had stopped "in time."

After that extraordinary thrill of silence John Parke spoke again in a voice which quivered strangely. "I came to tell you," he said, "that Letitia is ill."

"Ah!" said Mary. And she added gravely, "I do not wonder," with sudden seriousness: but there was nothing more in her gentle countenance; no anger; no fear.

The nurse, who was the least enlightened of all, yet the most eager, the most full of surmises, said with anxiety, yet timidity, "Mrs. Parke has been so anxious. She has taken so much out of herself."

"Yes, I am afraid she has been very anxious," said



Mary still with that mild, yet strange
was, perhaps, very natural—in the circu
"She was afraid lest anything shoul
and so anxious for every help that coul
—everything that the doctor or we coul
The others listened silent to this
spoke. If Mary remembered what had h
she consciously and willingly put it out
nobody could tell. She nodded her head
in silent assent. Then she spoke, her co
listening as if to the voice of fate.
"I understand that," she said, "and then
last—it was the overstrain at the last."
What did she mean? Even Agnes ask
this question, wondering over again whether
a dream, or whether it was true. John Pa
amid the group of women, with his heart as
lead, his ears keen to hear any word that cou
light on the mystery. But none came. Was t
mystery at all? Was it a mere encounter betw
mother who was happy, and the mother who wa
forgive her!) disappointed—but no more? He sto
some minutes, waiting, terrified, yet eager to hear
then unsatisfied, yet painfully relieved, as if he
escaped a sentence of death, walked away.
The doctor came afterwards, and pronounced
highest panegyric upon Mar. He had done exa
what it was best and wisest for him to do. He
slept, he had swallowed obediently all that was gi
him, and gone to sleep again. There now remain
nothing for him but to be promoted to the disus
practices of eating, and to go on. Dr. Barker, like a

elated and successful practitioner, who is aware that great honour and glory will result to himself from the happy issue of this difficult case, freely applauded everybody, even the melancholy culprit, who was a woman of the keenest conscience, and could scarcely be kept from denouncing herself. The nurses, he said, were half the battle, and he had been most ably seconded. And he was ready even to agree without the faintest idea of her meaning or any curiosity on the subject, in Mary's happy assertion that she had arrived "just in time." "Precisely," the doctor said, "just when your appearance was the most invaluable stimulant — just when he was able to profit by it. I agree with you entirely, Lady Frogmore, you came in the nick of time."

It was considered very strange in the house, accustomed to appeal to the doctor in these constant visits of his if a finger ached, that he did not see Mrs. Parke that day. John expected that she was asleep, and that it was possible she might be quite well when she woke, and Dr. Barker left the house thinking that there were too many women about, and that they were an excitable lot, as women usually were, making as much fuss about that boy as if his getting well were a miracle; whereas he (Dr. Barker) had always been certain with proper care that the boy would get well. He was not a pessimist, but always ready to think the best. And, indeed, Dr. Barker, though he did not fail to dwell upon Mar's recovery as a wonderful proof of what science could do ["for we had no constitution to work upon, no constitution, and everything against us"] dismissed the boy otherwise from his mind and fixed his thoughts wonderingly upon Mary, who seemed to have

come out of her hallucination or mania, or whatever it was, at a moment's notice in the most astonishing way. It was as if she had always been there, always anxious about him, caring for him. And Dr. Barker smiled at her idea that she was just in time. He had observed it though he had not said anything, and put it down in a mental note book as a curious evidence of the delusions which still linger in a mind that once has been off its balance. Mary had made an immense advance by recognizing her boy, and this mild little extravagance of thinking she had come "just in time"—poor thing—showed how the wind was blowing; how her mind had been affected by the supposed imminence of a crisis. He put it down in his mind as a thing to note, when other patients were similarly affected. The reader knows that the doctor was wrong; but so are a great many, both doctors and other wise people, who take the reverberation of an accidental fact for the foundation of an all-embracing theory—from which many strange things sometimes arrive.

Agnes Hill enacted what she herself came to think afterwards a somewhat ridiculous part for the rest of this day. She had everything that could be wanted for the sick-room brought upstairs in what may be called a rude form; pieces of beef and kettles of water destined to make Mar's beef tea, and everything else that could be thought of, so that the ante-room resembled an amateur kitchen, filled with a score of things that could be made no use of, and which the indignant cook sent up in quantities, lest the ladies should want anything. A fire sufficient to cook by in the height of summer is not a comfortable thing. And still less was the con-

dition of mind comfortable in which Miss Hill sat watching, afraid to rest or to admit any alleviation, tolerating with difficulty the presence of the nurse who, deeply interested and curious, addressed all her faculties to the task of finding out what was meant by these precautions. The food that had been sent up from the kitchen had been very dainty; it could not be because of any imperfection in that; and the nurse smiled at the thought that she could be supposed to have been careless in the warming or preparation of anything. What then was the meaning of it? When her colleague in her agony of compunction confided the story of her dreadful failure, of the sleep that had lasted all night, and the cordial that had presumably caused it, a strange gleam of light came into the mystery. Mrs. Parke had been in the sick-room when the night nurse had fallen asleep, and when she woke in the morning Lady Frogmore was there, and Lady Frogmore had asserted again and again that she had arrived "just in time." It seemed a wonderful gleam of light, yet on the whole it did not reveal much. What had happened, what Mrs. Parke had done, what Lady Frogmore had found, what had taken place while the legitimate guardian slept, could only be guessed and dimly guessed. The nurse formed a theory in her own mind not further from the truth than a theory unattended by actual foundations of fact usually is—much more the truth than Dr. Barker's conclusion as to the rags of delusion which remain in the mind when its greater trouble is gone. But it was a theory which Nurse Congreve of the Ridding Hospital kept closely to herself. A nurse, like a doctor, sees many strange chapters of family history—and among

them this was the most strange; but that was all th could be said.

The most curious thing was that before the day w half over, Lady Frogmore, coming into the ante-roo and finding it impossible to rest there as she had i tended, on account of the dreadful heat, suddenly fe into a fit of suppressed laughter at her sister's *batte de cuisine*, and laughed till the tears ran down h cheeks.

"What is all that for?" she said. "And do y think, Agnes, that you can make things for him bet than the cook?"

Miss Hill gave her sister a look full of reproach, b Lady Frogmore still laughed.

"The cook is a *cordon bleu*, and you will be melt away before that fire."

"Mary!" said Agnes in a tone which meant a hu dred things.

But before the time came, which was very soo when Mar was allowed his first chicken, even Agne resolution had broken down, and she began to be u comfortably conscious that to this almost tragedy the was a ludicrous side. Lady Frogmore was the wonde of wonders during all this time. She was never tire went without sleep night after night, and only looke the brighter in the morning; every cloud departed fro her serene countenance, her eyes were lighted up wi love and joy. To hear her say "my boy" was li listening to a song of triumph. It was she who shielde the night nurse from herself, and sent daily messag of inquiry about Letitia. When a day or two had elapse she made no further mention of having arrived in tim

Every appearance of having been injured, or terrified, or threatened died out of her face. She became as she had been in the old days when she first came to the Park as Lady Frogmore, but more assured, more self-possessed, like a woman above the reach of fate.

Meanwhile the centre of interest changed in the house. It was Letitia's room which was occupied by the nurses, shadowed from the sunshine and daylight, and filled with anxious cares. The half of the county was aroused by the news that Mrs. Parke, in her devotion to her nephew, and constant attendance upon him, had contracted the same fever, and now lay between life and death.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE condition of mind of Mrs. John Parke when she escaped from the hands of Lady Frogmore was one which no words of mine could describe. And yet her excitement was scarcely greater then than it had been during all that day. The extraordinary and awful discovery of the morning, that Mar was not going to die, that all her hopes were fallacious, and she and her children doomed to insignificance forever, had so unsettled her mind, which was fixed in a contrary idea, that in the storm and passion which possessed her soul she was scarcely responsible for her actions. To say this is a long way from saying that she was mad, and not responsible for her actions at all. Letitia was mad with passion, with contradiction, with the dreadful de-

struction of all her dreams—and when there came whirling into her soul like a burning arrow the horrible suggestion that was murder, she did not seem to have leisure or power to think of it, to consider it, much more to reject it and cast it out of her, but only to feel keenly penetrated by it, transfixed, so that the mad confusion became more terrible still, and the writhing of her spirit more convulsive from this painful dart, which went through and through her. She seemed to obey some command that had been given to her when she went with what seemed premeditation to the shop in the street of the little town where she had gone to call on her friend. There was no time to think, only to do. All the evening she was in this hurried breathless state. She had to sit down at the dinner table, to answer questions, to talk and look like her usual self; and then when she escaped upstairs, pretending she was tired, there was still no time, no time to think. She gave the nurse the potion, not sure whether that was not the thing that would destroy, while the other emptied into the innocent milk was nothing at all, a mere restorative. She did not know which was which. What did it matter? There was no time to think. Thus when Mary seized her it was but the climax of a miserable day, a day which had been all one rush from morning to night.

And then the stuff was spilt between them. It was a good thing the stuff was spilt—all spilt and useless on the floor except a little which went upon her dressing gown. Milk makes a stiff mark, hardens the stuff it stains, as if it were blood. Mary jumped back to save her grey gown. Oh, she did not mean to have

her grey silk spoiled whatever happened, which was so like Mary. And then Letitia had got away. Nobody had seen it one way or the other, or knew anything about it except Mary. And what was there to know? Nothing! the stuff was spilt—there was nothing—nothing! She had done no harm—absolutely no harm. What was there to know? On the whole it had relieved her heart and her breathing when the stuff was spilt; she would not have liked to drink it as Mary tried to make her. No—she would not have drunk it; but when it was spilt, that was all right again. The only thing she regretted was that it did not splash up upon Mary's gown. She would have liked to spoil that Quakerish dress. It would have been a satisfaction. And she did not meet a creature as she went back to her room. John was not there. Nobody need know that she had ever been out of it. To be sure there were Mary and Agnes—but they would not say anything. It was all one; Mar must live, and all her hopes must die—but at all events no one could say that she had harmed him. Never, never! she had not harmed him. She was even capable of falling asleep in her exhaustion and had a succession of dreams or dozes. She did not know what was going on till it was light, till the morning had begun, and then she jumped up and went and looked out at the sky, feverishly anxious to know whether it was fine or whether it rained, though this was of no importance to anyone; and then she had sent John to Mary, thinking it best to have the catastrophe over whatever it should be—and then went to bed again and fell asleep, deep asleep, lying like a log through all those brilliant morning hours.

Who it was who said first that Letitia had the fever, that she had caught it in her devotion to her nephew, no one ever knew. It was the kind of rumour which rises by itself. She was ill and in bed, and what so natural as that the fever, which is always popularly believed to be contagious, whatever the instructed may say, should have seized another victim? The housemaids were extremely nervous whether they might not themselves be the next to be stricken, and half the county sent to inquire with a depth of interest which was intensified by the fact that Mrs. John Parke had not been up to this time a popular woman. The ladies in the neighbourhood said to each other that they had done her injustice, that they never had supposed her capable of such devotion, and sent their grooms to inquire with even greater interest than they had shown for young Lord Frogmore; and whenever John was met he was overwhelmed with inquiries and bidden to keep up his spirits and hope the best, for if young Frogmore, so delicate a boy had recovered, why not Mrs. Parke? John, everybody said, looked ten years older, and that too was a revelation to his neighbours; for it had never been supposed that he was so sensitive or so romantically attached to his wife that even a possibility of danger to her should move him so much. Dr. Barker, it was remarked, did not look by any means so grave. He said brusquely that she would do very well, that it was not nearly so bad a case as that of Lord Frogmore, and his visits were much less frequent than they had been during Mar's illness. But even with all the superior sources of information which we possess, it is difficult to tell at what time it entered into Letitia's mind that

it would be a good thing to have the fever. She was capable of no such thought at first when she woke from that heavy sleep of exhaustion, and found her husband waiting for her awakening, waiting to question her, to catch her off her guard, to discover the meaning that had been in Mary's words. But Letitia's first glance at John's face had put her on her guard. She had woke refreshed and strengthened by the consciousness which felt like superior virtue, that Mar had taken no harm; and all her forces rallied to answer John, to bewilder and beguile him. His face was full of perplexity—he had got no light on what had happened, and every nerve must be strained, Letitia felt, to settle the question now and forever. She answered with a skill and coolness which would have been the admiration of any lawyer, his heavy cross-examination. He was not clever, poor fellow, he did not know what questions to ask; he asked the same questions again and again. He continued to show his own troubled thoughts, and the vague dread in his mind, rather than to get any light upon the mystery. But though she was so clever and he so much the reverse, it soon became apparent to Letitia that for the first time he was not convinced by the most specious explanations. She told him a story which fitted well enough and made it all clear. There were no joints in her armour, nothing at least of which he could take advantage—it was all quite coherent, hanging together. There was not a word to be said against it. But John was not convinced, the cloud did not lift from his face. Instead of the look of confidence he was wont to give her, the "Ah, now I see what you mean," which had so often been the reward of Letitia's

explanations, he sat heavily, staring at her, and found nothing to say. He could not object to anything, but he was not convinced. It was a new thing in their life.

Perhaps it was then, in the evening of that day, when her own excitement had calmed down, when she had succeeded in impressing upon herself as a thing that had been almost beyond hoping for, the highest testimony to her own virtues, that Mar had taken no harm—that the idea of having the fever came into Letitia's busy brain. All this excitement had told upon her, and the terrible shock of last night which, to do her justice, was as much caused by the dreadful sensation of having done that terrible thing, as of having been found out. She was not well. She found with satisfaction that her pulse was high and her breathing quick. She was feverish and excited, her whole being conscious of the tremendous crisis through which she had passed. And to meet Mary was beyond even Letitia's power. She was able for many things, but she did not feel herself able for that. It seemed to her that to remain in bed under any plausible pretext, to lie there at her ease, and repose herself, would be the greatest comfort she could think of. Her head did ache, her pulse was quick, the agitation which had not subsided in her mind counterfeited not badly the bodily agitation of fever. It was enough to deceive the nurse who came to her reluctantly, but whom she soon subdued to her service, and if it did not subdue Dr. Barker it was enough to make him consent to her assumption. It was herself who suggested gradually and with caution that she had caught it from young Frogmore. She said,

"Let no one come near me; you all say there is nothing contagious in it; but how could I have got it but from Mar? Therefore, keep the children away from me, keep the servants out of the room. No one must run any risk for me."

"Mamma, mamma," cried Letty, at the locked door. "Let me come in. I must come in and help to nurse you."

Letitia smiled with a pathetic look which altogether overcame the nurse. She went to the door and addressed the applicant outside. "Miss Letty, your dear mamma will not allow me to let you in. She says, seeing she has caught it from Lord Frogmore, you might catch it too—and you must not come in."

"Oh, what do I care for catching it!" cried Letty, beating upon the door. "Let me in, let me come in!"

But Letitia was inexorable. John was allowed to come in, morning and evening. John, who never got free from that cloud on his face, who stood at a little distance from the bed, and looked at his wife while he asked his little formula of questions. "If she had had a good night—how her pulse was—what the doctor thought." He was anxious and unfailing in his visits, but the cloud never departed from his face. Not even the fact that she had taken the fever convinced John. It softened him, indeed, and mingled pity with the painful perplexity in which his mind was left, which was something in her favour; but it was not enough to restore the confidence which was lost.

Thus the great house presented a very curious spectacle with its two centres of illness—on one side

full of b[illegible]ess and hope, on the other of dark and troublous t[illegible]ights. Mar was recovering moment by moment—t[illegible] could see him getting better—thriving, brightening, [illegible]xpanding like a flower. And the room, in which Agnes no l[illegible] to cook for him, was full of the chee[illegible] to which his young tremulous bass—for [illegible]ice had broken, and was now portento[illegible] deep, notwithstanding his weakness—w[illegible]w and then with a happy wor[illegible] received with delight and admir[illegible] jokes with acclamation in their grat[illegible] getting well. They told each other stories [illegible] dreadful time of his illness, and especially of that da[illegible] when they had given up hope, which was the day on which Agnes had received her letter, the day which preceded the change, which had been so wonderful a change in many ways. "But I never gave up hope," cried Tiny, "neither I nor nurse." "Oh," cried Letty, "you shut yourself up all the morning in your room. You would do no lessons or anything; and when I went to your door to call you, you could not hear me, for you were sobbing as if your heart would break: and nurse, though she always said there was hope, cried when she said it." "I cried because I could not help it: but I always believed he would get better," said the nurse. It was the cheerful nurse, she who had always hoped, who still kept partial charge of Mar, while the other one who had fallen asleep on that eventful night had gone to Mrs. Parke. This conflict of eager voices touched and amused the two ladies, who had no thought in the world but how

to humour and please and strengthen Mar. Mary laid her hand on Tiny's shoulder, and said to her sister, "It must be this child, for the other is too old." For what was it that Letty at nineteen was too old? But Agnes was not so easily moved. She shook her head a little. She loved the children; but Letitia's blood was in their veins, and who could tell when or how it might come out?

And the curious thing was that between Lady Frogmore and her son there was such a perfect understanding and union, as mother and child who have been all in all to each other do not always reach. Mary's mind had never been disturbed by fears that her boy might reject her tardy love, or might have been alienated from her. It was part of the change that her illness and permanent confusion of mind had wrought in her. She who had been so humble was now troubled with no doubts of herself. From the moment when the cloud rolled away, a soft and full sunshine of revival and certainty had come into Mary's mind. She had not felt herself guilty towards her boy, and she had never doubted that his heart would meet hers with all the warmth of nature. It was as if she had come home from a long involuntary absence. Had she ever forgotten him, put him aside, shrank from the sight of him? She did not believe it, or rather she never thought of it, rejecting every such thought and image. She never called him by the name of Mar as the others did. Some painful association, she could not tell what, was in the name. She called him "my boy" in a voice which was like that of a dove, and then with a firmer tone "Frog-

more." "It is time," she said, "that he bore his father's name." And she made no allusion to the past, never a word to show that she remembered the long years of separation. Even in her conversation with her sister when they were alone together, Mary altogether avoided the subject. To say [illegible] did not try to fathom the extraordinary ch[illegible] nake out how it was that such a revolution [illegible] possible would be to suppose her strangel[illegible] e rest of the human race. Her mind was [illegible]iosity and wonder, but it was never satisfied. [illegible]ogmore never seemed to remember that things [illegible]n different in the past. She spoke of Frogmore's [illegible] the Dower house, as if there had always been such a room. "I think we must have all the furniture renewed," she said, "he wants a man's surroundings now. He must have new bookcases and room for all his things." Agnes was so overawed by her sister's steadfast ignoring of all that was different in the past that she did not even dare to ask which was Frogmore's room. She had to divine which room was meant, and to carry out her orders without a question more.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"I AM very glad," said the man of business, "to hear that everything has gone so well." He gave John a somewhat curious look from under his eyelids. He did not doubt the honest meaning of his co-trustee; but that there should have been for so long before Mr. Parke's eyes the prospect of such a change—the almost certainty that the delicate boy would die, and title, wealth, and importance—every advancement he had ever dreamed—should come to him: and then in a moment that the whole brilliant prospect should be wiped out, and himself and his children thrust back into the shade—was an ordeal which would try the best. It was impossible but that the thought of it must have entered John's mind. He must have felt himself again heir presumptive; he must have believed that a few hours would restore to him all and more than he had lost. And then all had disappeared again, and by an event at which John must pronounce himself glad. It was a severe trial for any man. Mr. Blotting attributed to this the cloud upon John Parke's face, and was sorry, but could not blame him. It was but too natural that he should feel so. His wife's illness, too, the astute man of business could easily enough conceive to spring from the same cause. She, no doubt, had felt it still more keenly than John had done. He had seen the

doctor, and was aware that Dr. Barker did not treat Mrs. Parke's fever as very serious; and the lawyer had his own ideas of human nature, which seemed to him to account for many things. He would have treated with the supremest contempt any suggestion that either one or the other had thought a thought, much less lifted a finger to the detriment of their charge; but it could not be expected that they should in their hearts welcome the restoration to health of this young supplanter as if he had been their son.

"Blotting," said John Parke, "I have something very serious to say to you. Do you know that Lady Frogmore has come entirely to herself? She has not only fully recognized and acknowledged her son, but she seems to have forgotten that she ever did otherwise. Barker says it is what he always hoped—that a great shock some time would bring her completely back."

"But do you think it will last?" said the lawyer, shaking his head.

"He thinks it will last—he is a better authority than I am. Well! she was to be the guardian you know, and all we did has been done by private arrangement between ourselves to save public discussion—and may be changed in the same way?"

"I can't think what you are driving at?" Mr. Blotting said.

"Oh, it is easy enough to understand. I don't wish to resume the charge of the boy, Blotting, especially now when it will be full of embarrassments. His mother would always be interfering. I don't deny her right. But it was only because she was disabled that I took it

at all, don't you know. I want to give it up now. I want to leave this house. Don't you see it puts us in a false position living here? My children will suffer from it. They get exaggerated ideas of their own importance. They're of no particular importance," said John, with perhaps a faint bitterness in his tone, "and it's very bad for them. There was all that fuss about Duke, for instance. I didn't think of it at the time, but it was highly absurd. It was calculated to give the boy the most false idea——"

"We—ell," said the co-trustee. He could not contradict this, which was certainly the truth, and had been remarked by everybody. "Perhaps there may be something in what you say; but that boy of yours is a capital fellow, Parke. How cleverly he brought his cousin in and set things on their right footing."

John did not for a moment reply. It is always pleasant to hear your son praised, but when he is praised for seeing further, and showing better sense than yourself, it is perhaps not so pleasant. Mr. Parke had thought a great deal since those recent events, and had seen many things in a different light. Amid other things those festivities, in which Duke was the hero, now appeared to him in the light of an almost incredible piece of folly. He was glad to think that he had remonstrated at the time, but his remonstrances (which he did not now remember had been very feeble) were overborne. All the same he did not quite like it when his colleague so readily agreed. It would have been civil at least to say that nobody else thought so, and that it was the most natural thing in the world.

"Well!" he said, sharply, in a very different tone

from that lingering monosyllable which expressed so unflattering an acquiescence in his own self-reproach. "We agree you see so far as that is concerned. And I am anxious to get back to my own house. Greenpark is our home, not this place, which belongs to my nephew. Now that his mother is quite restored she is the right person to make a home for him. There never can be any question as to her motives."

"Parke! there never has been, so far as I am aware, the slightest question as to your motives."

John waved his hand; he did not speak. Was it, perhaps, that he was not capable of doing so? He stood for a moment without saying anything, and then went on—

"Anyhow, it would be better for us all. One gets to think one has a right to things of which one has only the use. I don't like it for the children. I am anxious to get home. And our tenants there are going: their time is up. I should like it to be settled at once. It was between you and me before, an amicable arrangement. Now we can return to the original letter of the will, don't you know? Mary must be the acting guardian as he wished. My brother," John said with a faint sigh, which he endeavoured to restrain, "had the most perfect confidence in his wife."

"Talking of that," said Mr. Blotting, "I hope, if you will allow me to say so, that you are not taking this important step without talking it over with Mrs. Parke. I know she is ill——"

"My wife and I are entirely of the same mind," said John hastily. "I know her opinion," he added, hesitat-

ing. "Lady Frogmore and she could not get on in the same house. They are very old friends, and there is a long-standing grievance——"

The lawyer laughed, as wise men do when the female element comes in. He thought he had now the key to the situation.

"Ah," he said, "I understand! the ladies are like that—very charming, but apt to have grudges, and hating each other like poison. They are all more or less like that."

It seemed to John, in his momentary exasperation, as if he would have liked to knock his fellow-trustee down. To treat his sombre misery as if it had no deeper origin than a trivial quarrel! And yet it was the kindest thing that could have been done. He said to himself, with a rebound of the habitual affection he had for his wife, and sense that her credit was his, that Letitia, whatever she might be, was no fool. Blotting's women might be idiots like that, but she was not. He had the deepest horror for her fault (whatever it was) in his own heart, and sometimes could hardly bear to speak to her from thought of what she had done. But he could not let another man touch her, or point a finger of scorn at her. Whatever Letitia might be she was his, and she was no fool.

Mrs. Parke recovered slowly, and for weeks the avenue was traversed by files of inquirers with the cards of all the best people about. And it seemed the most natural thing in the world that as soon as she was able she should be taken to her own home at Greenpark for change of air. Lady Frogmore had already gone, taking her son with her to her dower

house. It was said that there was something wrong with the drains at the great house, as there is in so many great establishments, and that after two cases of fever they must at once be seen to. In the commotion caused by this it need scarcely be said that the cottages at Westgate were for[illegible] continued till Mar's majority to be the mo[illegible]ue group of dwellings and the most poisonou[illegible]nfection in the parish. Even when that time c[illegible] almost too much for all the romantic people [illegible]ee them pulled down. The Park stood empty [illegible]ar or two, however, neither young Lord Frog[illegible] his former guardian coming back; but as ther[illegible] various very natural reasons for this, few questions [illegible]ere asked or remarks made. The young lord went abroad with his mother for some time—and when he returned he went to Oxford, which was what he had never been expected to be able for. But a fever is often rather a good thing when it is over, clearing away incipient mischief and settling the constitution. I do not venture to answer for this doctrine, but it was believed by all the servants and village people, who had now changed their opinion as to the practicability of "raring" Mar. By means of the changed treatment to which he was subjected, if not of the settling influence of his fever, he grew so strong that his unusual height seemed to be no drawback to him, and he was not without distinction in the records of his college in matters of athletic success, as well as in other ways.

When Mar reached his majority the festivities rivalled those of a similar period in the history of Duke, his cousin, but were not so imposing. And it was not very

long after that great epoch when Lady Frogmore and her constant companion had an announcement made to them which was not unexpected, yet which it must be allowed they had done their best to avert. The reader, perhaps, will have divined what Mary meant when she laid her hand upon the shoulder of her little namesake, Mary Parke—still called Tiny by all her surroundings, though now Tiny no more—and said, "It must be this one, for Letty is too old." And perhaps that experienced reader will also divine that Lady Frogmore's conclusion, possibly by mere force of the fact that it was her conclusion, proved wrong. I do not attempt to say anything to excuse the disadvantage of Letty's age; two years is no doubt a very serious matter when it occurs early in the twenties. But this may be alleged in extenuation, that Mar was very much grown up, almost elderly for his age. He was more like five-and-twenty than one-and-twenty, everybody said. His upbringing, which was on the whole somewhat solitary, and his delicate health as a boy, and the many thoughts into which his peculiar position and circumstances led him, were calculated to mature the mind. And young Frogmore felt himself quite the eldest member of the family when he came back with his degree (in modest honours) a year after his majority, and found his mother and his aunt ready to worship him for being so clever, for being so strong, for having such good health, and for wearing the ribbon of his college eleven. They were not quite certain, at least Mary was not, for which of these things she was most grateful to her boy; but I myself have no doubt upon the subject. It was for being so well that she admired him most.



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he took her advice often, and what was more he left most things to her guidance by habit and indolence as he had always done. But he did not believe in her as he had once done—that was over. It is a thing that has had few consequences, because as I have said of the indolence which grows with years and habit, which is much stronger than opinion. But, a thing almost as remarkable as John's want of faith, Letitia felt it, though it had so few practical results. She felt it more than she had ever felt anything impalpable in all the course of her life. It made very little difference externally, but yet she felt it to the bottom of her heart. And she for one never forgot those occurrences which destroyed her husband's faith in her. So far as could be known they had altogether passed from the recollection of Lady Frogmore, but Letitia never forgot. She gave the incident a twist, however, which made it a matter to talk about, and even to exult over, by one of the strangest distortions of thought ever recorded. There was nothing she was so fond of talking of as the tremendous responsibility that had been laid upon her when John undertook the charge of Frogmore. "For it is easy talking," Mrs. Parke would say, "about John undertaking it. What had John to do with the bringing up of a delicate boy? Of course it was me; and if ever there was a responsibility in this world which I should recommend everybody to avoid it is the task of bringing up other people's children; and a very delicate boy, and one whose death would have been a positive advantage to us if anything had happened to him. Can you imagine such a position? I would not undertake it again if the Queen were to ask me. It is a life-long

subject of gratitude to me," Mrs. Parke would add with a sigh of satisfaction, "that he got no harm in my house."

And John listens to this over and over again repeated—and is never clear why it annoys him so. For events grow dim after the course of years—and he never did know what Letitia had done. Meanwhile it is and will remain for all her life Mrs. Parke's great subject of self-felicitation that Lord Frogmore never came to any harm while he remained under her care.

THE END.





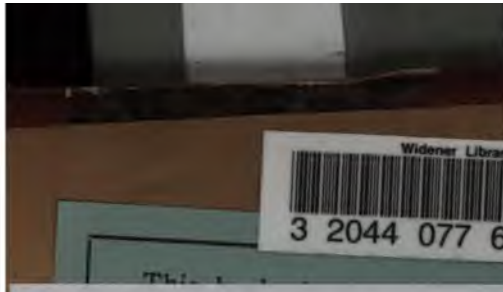
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